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JUNE

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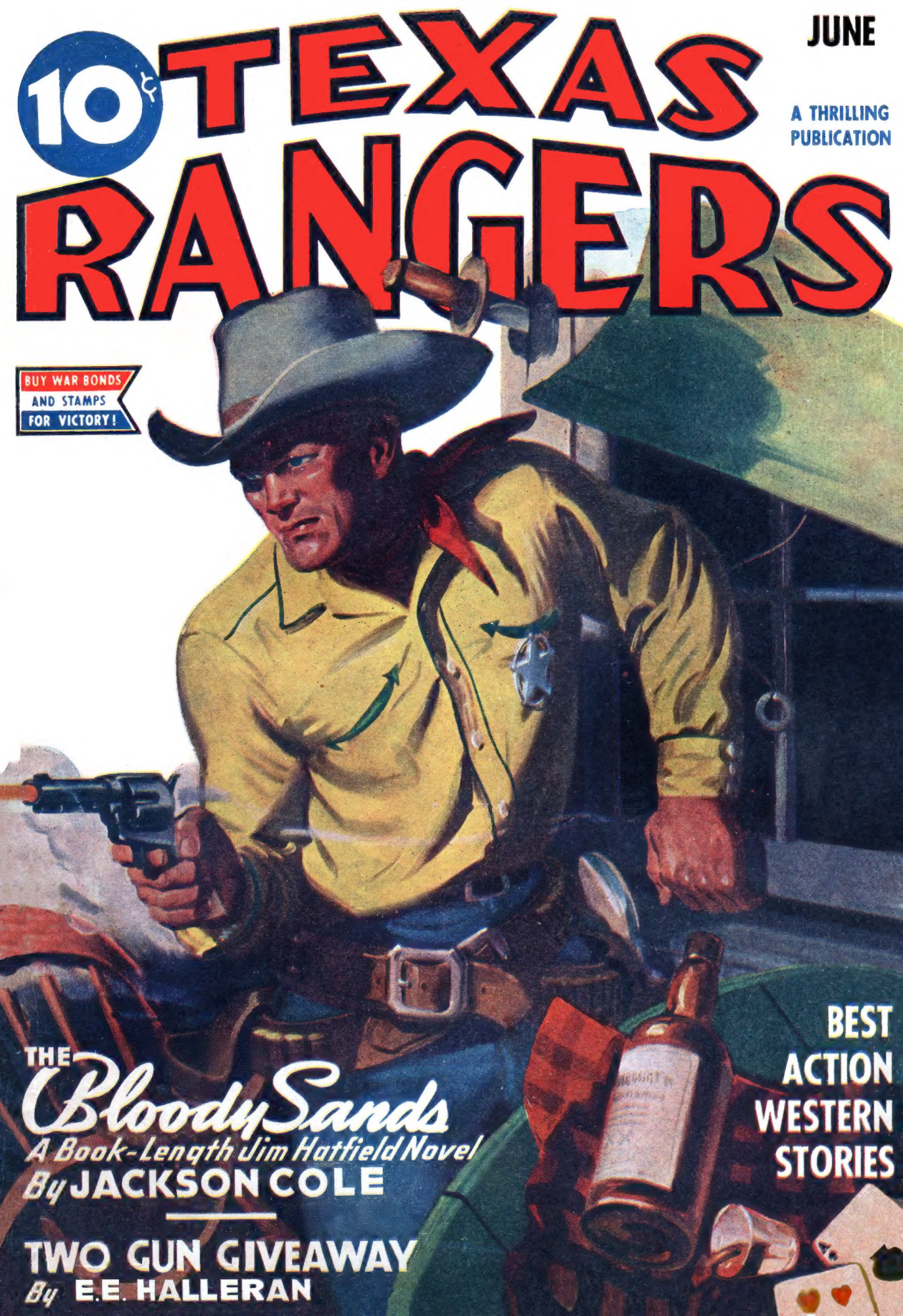

THE *Bloody Sands*
A Book-Length Jim Hatfield Novel
By JACKSON COLE

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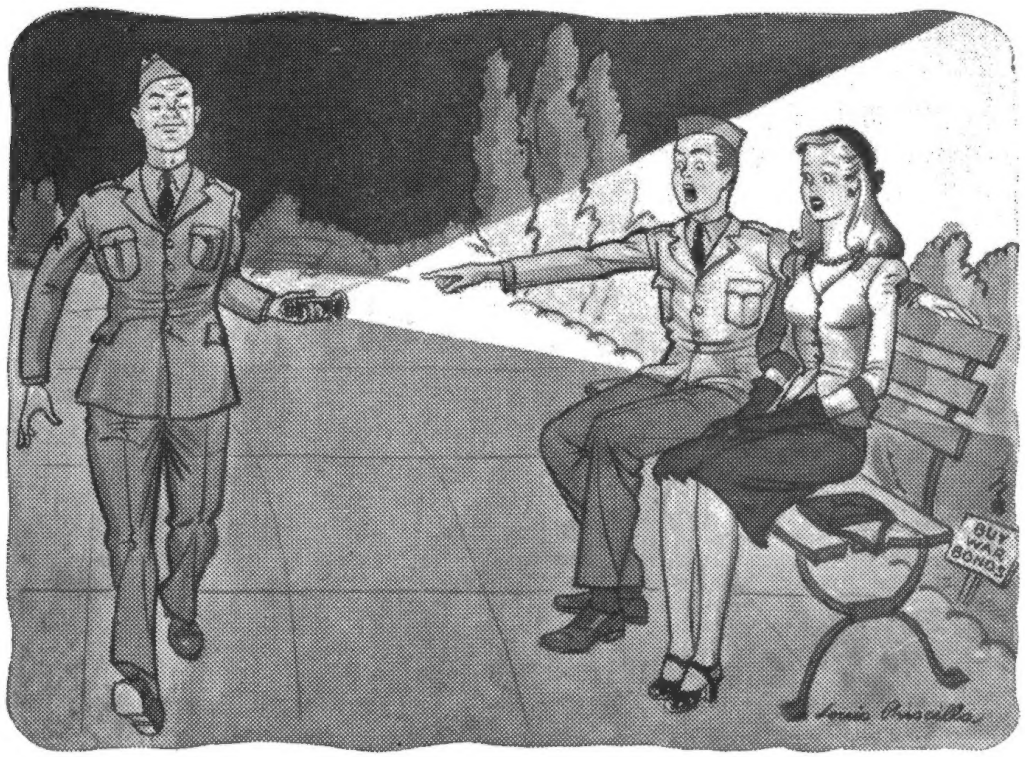

"You're violating the blackout, Sergeant."

A THOUGHT to keep in mind, next time your dealer is out of "Eveready" flashlight batteries: Nearly all we can make right now are being put to good use by either the armed forces or essential war industries.

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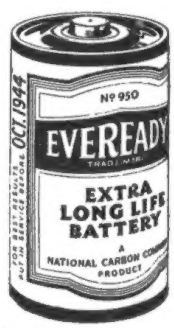

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Why put up with days . . . months . . . YEARS of discomfort, worry and fear—if we can help you? Learn NOW about this perfected truss-invention for most forms of reducible rupture. Surely you keenly desire . . . you eagerly CRAVE to enjoy most of life's activities and pleasures once again. To work . . . to play . . . to live . . . to love . . . with the haunting fear of Rupture lessened in your thoughts! Literally *thousands* of Rupture sufferers *have* entered this *Kingdom of Paradise Regained.* Perhaps we can do as much for you. Some wise man said, "Nothing is impossible in this world"—and it is true, for where other trusses have failed is where we have had our greatest success in many cases! Even doctors—thousands of them—have ordered for themselves and their patients. Unless your case is absolutely hopeless *do not despair.* The coupon below brings our Free Rupture Book in plain envelope. Send the coupon now.

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C. E. BROOKS, Inventor

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No . . . don't order a Brooks now—FIRST get the complete, revealing explanation of this world-famous rupture invention, THEN decide whether you want to try for the comfort—the wonderful degree of freedom from fear and worry—the security—the blessed relief thousands of men, women and children have reported. They found our invention the answer to their prayers! And you risk nothing as the complete appliance is SENT ON TRIAL. Surely you owe it to yourself to investigate this no-risk trial. Send for the facts now—today—hurry! All correspondence strictly confidential.

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Proof of the value and outstanding merit of the BROOKS APPLIANCE is clearly shown by the fact that over 9000 doctors have ordered it for themselves or their patients. One doctor alone has ordered for his patients over 400 Brooks Appliances. Follow your doctor's advice! If he says you have a reducible rupture and advises a proper-fitting support, don't subject yourself to further delay, which may prove dangerous, but send us your name and address immediately. Stop Your Rupture Worries! Enjoy the comfort, freedom of action and physical security which this made-to-order appliance will give you.

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State whether for Man ☐ Woman ☐ or Child ☐

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TEXAS RANGERS

Vol. 18, No. 3 | Every Story Brand New | June, 1944

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A COMPLETE BOOK-LENGTH JIM HATFIELD NOVEL

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TWO GUN GIVEAWAY . . . . E. E. Halleran 64
"Once a Lawman Always a Lawman" is the Code of Lefty Andrews as He Sides a Pard

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More Radio Technicians, Operators Now Make $50 a Week Than Ever Before

Fixing Radios pays better now than for years. With new Radios out of production, fixing old sets, which were formerly traded in, adds greatly to the normal number of servicing jobs.

Broadcasting stations, Aviation and Police Radio, and other Radio branches are scrambling for Operators and Technicians. Radio Manufacturers, now working on Government orders for Radio equipment, employ trained men. The Government, too, needs hundreds of competent civilian and enlisted Radio men and women. You may never see a time again when it will be so easy to get started in this fascinating field.

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The moment you enroll for my Course I start sending you EXTRA MONEY JOB SHEETS that show how to earn EXTRA money fixing Radios. Many make $5, $10 a week EXTRA in spare time while learning. I send you SIX big kits of real Radio parts. You LEARN Radio fundamentals from my lessons—PRACTICE what you learn by building typical circuits—PROVE what you learn by interesting tests on the circuits you build.

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Men likely to go into military service, soldiers, sailors, marines, should mail the Coupon now! Learning Radio helps Service men get extra rank, extra prestige, more interesting duties, much higher pay. Also prepares for good Radio jobs after service ends. Over 1,700 Service men now enrolled.

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Think of the NEW jobs that Television, Frequency Modulation, Electronics, and other Radio developments will open after the war! You have a real opportunity. Get into Radio NOW and be ready to cash in when Victory releases these amazing wartime Radio developments for peacetime uses!

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Name ..... Age.....

Address .....

City ..... State.....4FR

THE trouble with Texas folks is that they're too peaceable. Maybeso it ain't entirely their fault. They were "brung up" thataway. Even the name "Texas" comes from an Injun word, *tejas*, meaning "friendly." And an hombre has to live up to his name.

You don't need to believe me, folks. Just take the word of one of the world's fightinest men, Admiral Chester Nimitz, who as you know is boss of the U. S. Pacific Fleet.

Here is what Admiral Nimitz told the home folks the other day. He said there are only 400,000 Texans in the Army, 95,000 in the Navy, including himself, being a Texas boy; 20,000 in the Marines and 2,500 in the Coast Guard.

One Out of Eight

That adds up to a measly little old 517,500 Texans in the armed forces of these proud United States. Only a little better than a half-million, out of a State that has a population of 6,500,000! Now if you're smart with a lead pencil, you can figure out the humiliatin' facts for yourself. Only one out of every eight Texans is in fightin' clothes!

Honest to goodness, I wonder what we all are comin' to. Only one out of eight in the big fight. Seven folks stayin' home for every Texas boy that's out there whammin' at the enemy. It's enough to make Sam Houston turn over on his sword. It'll shame every brave Texas Ranger, out yonderly somewhere in his lonely and unmarked grave on the Western prairie. It humbles the breed that fought for liberty at the Alamo, which even surpassed Stalingrad for bloody sacrifice.

Only one out of eight. Why gals and galluses, the rest of the country has one out of twelve or thirteen in fightin' clothes, including Brooklyn! To judge from the figures, Texas is only around 50 percent more willing than the average. It means only three Texas boys went when two went from other parts, north, east and west.

The Home Front

Well, I reckon there's some satisfaction in knowing that the home folks are doing their dangedest to make up for it. Texas produces a large part of the oil, a big percentage of the meat and more than her share of crops, from oranges to onions.

So Texas ain't draggle-tailing too much. Just give Texas time to get mad and rise up her hackle and she'll wham into this war on a big scale. You can look for anything to happen then.

Admiral Nimitz said that the 99th Seabee Battalion, composed mostly of Texans, is already figuring to build a tunnel under the Pacific Ocean to Tokyo in order to get closer to the shootin'.

Jungle Fighters

Off and on the newspapers let on as how Texas soldiers are mighty good jungle fighters. Maybeso that surprises a heap of folks, but if you'd talk to some of those boys from around Beaumont, you'd understand.

Did you Ranger Clubbers ever hear of the Big Thicket?

Well, the Big Thicket is a hunk of east Texas about the size of New Jersey. Originally, it was over 100 miles long and about half as wide. Large areas are still in their natural state, with undergrowth so dense under pine and hardwood trees that it's plumb impenetrable. It is a tangle of vines and creepers, including seven varieties of orchids, with ferns that grow taller than a man.

Naturally, a place such as that has a sinister reputation. The Big Thicket is full of wild game, includin' plenty of predatory varmints, such as cougars.

It's the home of the original bushwackers. The term "bushwhackers" originated there, I'm told. It isn't swamp, this jungle-like wilderness, but it is full of lakes and ponds and creeks and bayous.

Settlers have a hard time of it. The soil is so rich that cleared land grows over discouragingly fast. At one place the Big Thicket extended 60 miles in the past 40 years, they claim.

So when you turn a Texas bushwhacker loose in a tropical jungle infested with a lot of slant-eyed sopranos, the latter will be sosorry in a hurry.

The Battle of Sabine Pass

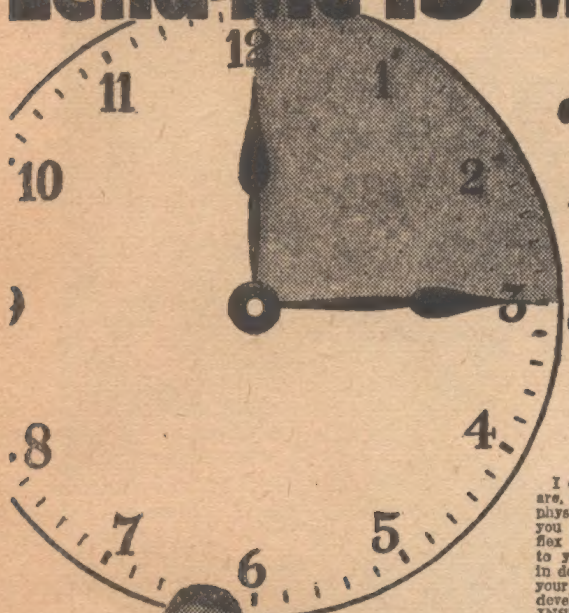
Texans had a mite of experience at invasion in this general locality one time. Ever hear about the Battle of Sabine Pass?

It was fought in 1863, when 4000 "damyankees" tried to invade Texas from the Gulf of Mexico, in an attempt to sever Texas from Louisiana.

(Continued on page 73)

Lend Me 15 Minutes A Day

..and I'll prove I can make you a NEW MAN



I'M "trading-in" old bodies for new! I'm taking men who know that the condition of their arms, shoulders, chests and legs—their strength, "wind," and endurance—is not 100%. And I'm making NEW MEN of them.

I don't care how old or young you are, or how ashamed of your present physical condition you may be. If you can simply raise your arm and flex it I can add SOLID MUSCLE to your biceps—yes, on each arm—in double-quick time! I can broaden your shoulders, strengthen your back, develop your whole muscular system INSIDE and OUTSIDE! I can add inches to your chest, give you a vise-like grip, make those legs of yours lithe and powerful. I can shoot new strength into your old backbone, exercise those inner organs, help you cram your body so full of pep, vigor and red-blooded vitality that you won't feel there's even "standing room" left for weakness and that lazy feeling! Before I get through with you I'll have your whole frame "measured" to a nice, new, beautiful suit of muscle!

HERE'S WHAT ONLY 15 MINUTES A DAY CAN DO FOR YOU

Are you ALL MAN—tough-muscled, on your toes every minute, with all the up-and-at-'em that can lick your weight in wildcats? Or do you need the help I can give you—the help that has already worked such wonders for other fellows, everywhere?

I WAS A 97-lb. WEAKLING

All the world knows I was ONCE a skinny, scrawny 97-pound weakling. And NOW it knows that I won the title, "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man." Against all comers! How did I do it? How do I work miracles in the bodies of other men in only 15 minutes a day? The answer is *"Dynamic Tension,"* the amazing method I discovered and which changed me from a 97-pound weakling into the champion you see here!

In just 15 minutes a day, right in the privacy of your own home, I'm ready to prove that *"Dynamic Tension"* can lay a new outfit of solid muscle over every inch of your body. Let me put new, smashing power into your arms and shoulders—give you an armor-shield of stomach muscle that laughs at punches—strengthen your legs into real columns of surging stamina. If lack of exercise or wrong living has weakened you inside, I'll get after that condition, too, and show you how it feels to LIVE!

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America's Greatest "Builder of Men"

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And now that the call is for men capable of helping America meet and conquer any national emergency, many thousands of others (even those already in their country's Army and Navy) are calling upon Charles Atlas to build the kind of men America vitally needs.

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"My doctor thinks your course is fine. Have put two inches on my chest and ½ inch on my neck." —B. L., Oregon

"Your book opened my eyes . . . 1½" gain on my biceps and 1" more on my chest." —J. F., Penna.

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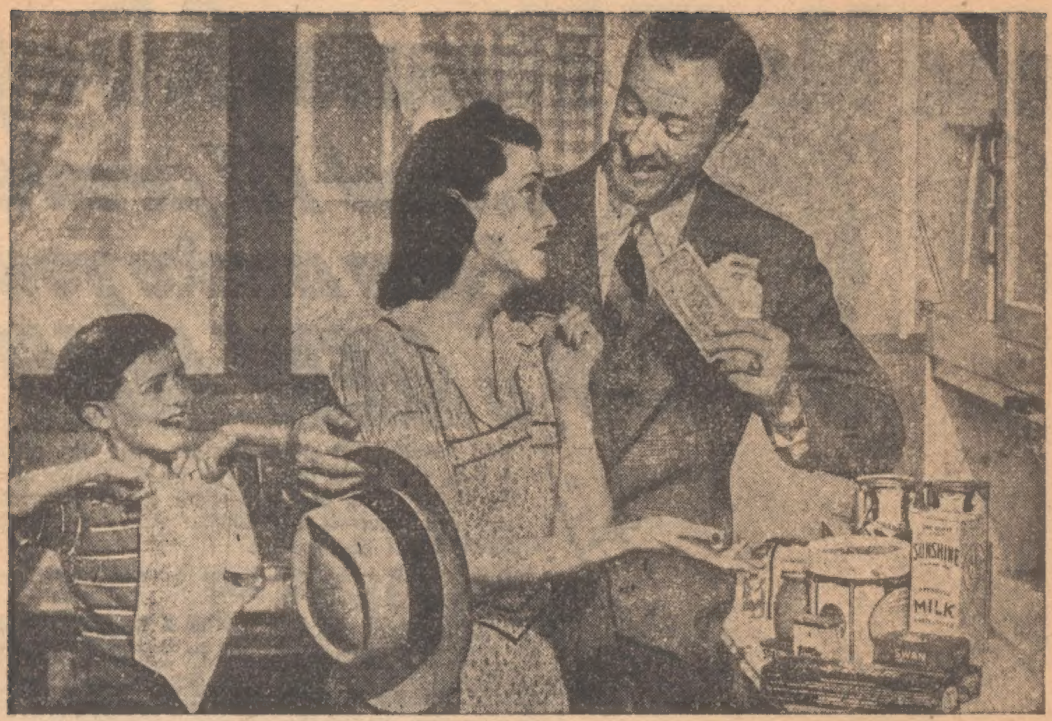

What good is a $10.00 raise ... if it then costs you $12.00 more to live?

SURE WE ALL want a raise . . . but raises today are bad medicine. And here's why... Suppose you do get a raise . . . and a lot of others get one, too. What happens? The cost of manufacturing goes up. Naturally your boss has to add this increase in cost to the price he asks the retailer. And the retailer, in turn, raises his price to the consumer . . . that's YOU.

So what good is a raise if your living costs go up even faster?

Of course, it's hard to give up the luxuries of life . . . and even harder to give up some of the necessities. But this is War! And when you think of the sacrifices our fighting men are making . . . many of them giving up their lives for us . . . no sacrifice we can make should be too great.

So . . . start doing these seven things now . . .

1. **Buy only what you need.** Take care of what you have.
2. **Don't try to profit from the war.** Don't ask more than you absolutely *must* for what you have to sell.
3. **Pay no more than ceiling prices.** Buy rationed goods only by exchanging stamps.
4. **Pay taxes willingly.**
5. **Pay off your old debts**—all of them.
6. **If you haven't a savings account,** start one. If you have an account, put money in it—regularly. Put money in life insurance, too.
7. **Buy and hold War Bonds.** Don't stop at 10%. Remember—Hitler stops at nothing!

Use it up . . . Wear it out.
Make it do . . . Or do without.

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—**A. O., Minn.*

**Actual pupils' names on request. Pictures by professional models.*

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**H. C. S., California*

You, too, can learn to play your favorite instrument —quickly, easily—right in your own home!

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Yes, that's exactly what you do. From the start you actually play familiar melodies. As you master one, you go on to another.

How is it possible? Well, you learn by a modern method that does away with humdrum scales and exercises. You spend your time playing interesting pieces from real notes. It's really FUN learning to play this modern way—it makes practicing a pastime instead of a bore. More than 750,000 pupils have enrolled for this amazing course.

A Sound Method

The secret of this method that has taught thousands to play is simple. It's based on the fact that the lessons not only *tell* you what to do, in the printed instructions. They actually *show* you—with large, clear pictures—what positions to take—every move to make. You *read* how to play a tune — you see how to play it—then you play it and hear how it goes. A teacher at your side couldn't make it more clear.

NOTICE

Please don't confuse the U. S. School of Music method with any system of teaching music "by ear" or by trick charts. Our method teaches you to play by actual notes—not by any trick or number system.

Print and Picture Sample — FREE

If you're really interested in learning music quickly and easily—and with little expense, send for our Free Booklet and Free Print and Picture Sample *today*. Don't wait. Fill in the coupon now—checking your favorite instrument. U. S. School of Music, 2946 Brunswick Bldg., New York 10, N. Y. Forty-sixth year. (Est. 1898.)

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Yet it's from the famous "Merry Widow" Waltz

From the above diagram you can see for yourself how easy it is to learn by this Print and Picture method. You simply look at the music and diagram and see which notes to strike. In a few minutes you find yourself playing the famous "Merry Widow Waltz."

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I am interested in music study, particularly in the instrument checked below. Please send me your free illustrated booklet, "How to Learn Music at Home," and the Free Print and Picture Sample.

(Do you have instrument? .....)

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The Mechanism of Mind

WHY YOU ARE AS YOU ARE—
and *What You Can Do About It!*

DID you ever stop to think *why* you do the things you do? Have you often—when alone—censored yourself for impulsive urges, for things said or done that did not truly represent *your real thoughts*, and which placed you at a disadvantage? Most persons are *creatures of sensation*—they react to instinctive, impelling influences which surge up within them and which they do not understand—*or know how to control.* Just as simple living things involuntarily withdraw from irritations, so likewise thousands of men and women are content to be motivated by their undirected thoughts which haphazardly rise up in their consciousness. *Today you must sell yourself* to others—bring forth your best abilities, manifest your personality, if you wish to hold a position, make friends, or impress others with your capabilities. You must learn how to draw upon your latent talents and powers, not be bent like a reed in the wind. There are simple, natural laws and principles which—if you understand them—make all this possible.

For centuries the Rosicrucians (not a religious organization), a worldwide movement of men and women devoted to the study of life and its hidden processes, have shown thousands how to probe these mysteries of self. Renowned philosophers and scientists have been Rosicrucians—today men and women in every walk of life owe their confidence and ability to solve personal problems to the Rosicrucian private, *sensible* method of self-development. Send today for a copy of the book, "The Mastery of Life," which will be sent to you without obligation. It will tell you of the Rosicrucians *and what they can do for you.* Address: Scribe I.E.A.

THE ROSICRUCIANS (AMORC), SAN JOSE, CALIFORNIA, U. S. A.

Fast as light, Hatfield jerked his gun and snapped a shot (CHAPTER XIX)

THE BLOODY SANDS

By JACKSON COLE

An Intrepid Texas Ranger Barges into a Three-Cornered Range War When Cattlemen, Sheepmen and Goat Ranchers Are Involved in a Sinister and Ruthless Scheme to Plunder Vast Wealth!

CHAPTER I

Death in the Desert

JIM HATFIELD was recalling the words of an old prospector as he rode northward by way of an old trail across the glaring inferno of the Tonto.

"The desert makes or breaks a man!"

To the west, some five miles distant, but looking much nearer in the hot, clear air, was a range of craggy hills as clean-cut as shadow in the blaze of the Texas sun. Into the brassy sky towered their massive spires and pinnacles, broken, jagged, ominous as the threat of a clutching hand.

The rugged battlement was strangely marbled with black and white, with here and there splotches of leprous green, poisonous yellow and flaming crimson. The dark mouths of canyons split the irregular wall, and the snaky crawlings of gulleys and dry washes, with ever and anon the raw scoring of a slide where wind and water and frost had loosened the rim-rock and sent it avalanching down the steep slopes to lie in

A COMPLETE JIM HATFIELD NOVEL

piled heaps of talus at the base, like to the shattered bones of some prehistoric monster that had died with futile writhings under the red heavens of a long dead age.

To the north, misty with distance, was a pale line of green that marked where the desert ended and the fertile rangeland began. To the south the desert rolled toward the unseen Rio Grande and the purple mountains of Mexico. To the east the hot sky and the hot sands merged in an indistinct shimmer of ghostly gray and molten amber. The crests of the western hills were rimmed about with saffron flame, but the fathomless east was an amber mystery as unreal as a mirage.

The desert was not altogether devoid of vegetation. Yuccas lifted tortured, distorted branches; the grotesque arms of cholla cactuses, covered with terrible barbed spines, seemed to writhe in torment. Here and there was a smoky puff apparently hanging in the air—the symmetrical rounding of a Crucifixion Tree, its miasmatic ball an intertwining mass of twigs, each twig a cruel thorn.

But the lonely growth did little to dispel the sense of death and desolation that brooded over the wasteland. Rather, it accentuated it—the futile struggling of reluctant life amid this universal desiccation and decay.

Dust devils leaped and whirled over the molten surface as a wind as searing as the blast from a furnace door boomed intermittently from the south. Jim Hatfield's eyes stung and burned with the irritating particles of alkali and of salt. The glistening coat of Goldy, his great sorrel horse, was powdered with the almost microscopic particles, and streaked dark with sweat. But despite their trip of many miles across the tortured sands and through the withering heat, neither the horse nor his tall rider showed appreciable signs of fatigue.

THE wind was strengthening, the dust devils cavorting with greater and more malignant energy.

"Glad we haven't much farther to go to get out of this hole of Hades, feller," Hatfield told Goldy, who snorted profound agreement.

Suddenly he pricked up his ears and turned his intelligent gaze toward the westward hills.

Hatfield, sensitive to all his horse's moods, followed the direction of his glance. His black brows drew together slightly as he studied the dancing dust devils near the line of shadow cast by the nearest cliffs. Several puffs that persisted with unusual regularity fixed his attention.

One lone, small cloud rolled northward steadily, as if held in the teeth of a steady blast. Some distance behind it flickered a half dozen or so more puffs, holding true to their course with the same singular directness of purpose.

"Feller," Hatfield muttered suddenly, "it ain't the wind kickin' up that dust, but hosses' irons. Look, yuh can make out the riders, now. One way out in front, the others hightailin' behind him. This looks sort of funny."

Nearly three miles of desert separated him from the speeding horsemen who diagonaled up from the south. But now they were directly opposite him, due west, and he could make out details of horses and men.

The man in front rode hunched low in his saddle, crouching over the neck of his speeding horse. Those behind sat erect.

"Feller in front tryin' to make hisself small as possible," the tall Ranger muttered. "The others don't seem to give a darn . . . Great blazin' fire!"

The last exclamation was fairly shot from the Ranger's lips. He tensed in his saddle, his lean, bronzed face with its rather wide mouth and prominent hawk nose abruptly bleak as the granite of the lowering hills.

From the pursuing forms, indistinctly seen through the dust clouds, had mushroomed puffs of a lighter gray than the swirling sand. A moment later, thin with distance, came the whiplash crack of rifles.

The man in front still rode on, hunched in his saddle, a deceptive mark in the dust. But even as Hatfield's slim hand tightened on the bridle, again the feathery puffs wisped up from the pursuit.

This time the fugitive threw his hands in the air, straightened, reeled and plummeted to the ground. The riderless horse plunged on for some hundreds of yards before jogging to a halt to stand with hanging head, apparently in the last stages of exhaustion.

The pursuers raced on. Hatfield saw the spurts of sand as they jerked their horses to a sliding halt. Before their horses came to a full stop they swung from saddles and grouped around the fallen man.

Hatfield's voice rang out like a silver trumpet blare of sound.

"Trail, Goldy, trail!"

Instantly the great sorrel extended himself. His powerful legs drove backward like pistons, he slugged his head above the bit and his long body literally poured itself across the ground, until he was like to a flicker of golden flame cleaving the desert.

Hatfield, grim, alert, steadied him with voice and hand. Leaning sideward he loosened the heavy Winchester snugged in the saddle-boot under his left leg. Then,

automatically, a hand dropped to the plain wooden butt of one of the long black guns that swung from the heavy double cartridge belts encircling his lean waist. His green eyes narrowed against the dust, he stared at the crouching group, while urging the flying sorrel to ever greater speed.

"Might be a posse throwin' down on an owlhoot," he muttered, "but it looks mighty like a plain case of killin' to me. Trail, Goldy!"

But before he was within rifle range, the group scattered like the fragments of a burst shell, forked their waiting horses and raced away, veering sharply to the west. Hatfield was still a mile distant from the motionless figure lying so lonely in the middle of the great plain when they vanished into one of the shadow canyon mouths that split the dark loom of the hills.

Goldy skittered to a foaming halt beside the body. Hatfield swung down and bent over the prostrate form, the hands of which were moving feebly.

The victim was an old man with grizzled hair and a short beard almost white. He stared into the face of the Ranger with glazing eyes.

"Water!" he mumbled feebly, a bloody froth staining his beard red as he spoke.

HATFIELD procured his canteen and gave him a drink. The man gulped spasmodically, the water trickling from the corners of his mouth, but managed to get some down. Hatfield dampened the wounded man's forehead and eased him into a more comfortable position. A single glance at the widening stain on the left breast of the faded shirt told the Ranger that he was going fast.

The old man was striving to speak.

"Take it easy, old-timer," Hatfield cautioned. "Lie down, now, and rest. What yuh got to say can wait."

"I'll have time to rest soon—all eternity—" the man whispered. "They—they thought they got it, but they didn't!"

JIM HATFIELD

"Got what?" the Ranger asked.

"Hat," mumbled the dying man. "Find hat—bring me."

Hatfield glanced about, saw a battered "J.B." lying on the sand nearby. He retrieved it and brought it to the old man who clutched at it with trembling fingers.

"Tear out sweat-band," he panted. "Every thing on inside of band. Take to Pat—first ranchhouse north of desert—give Pat. Tell —tell—"

He gasped, choked, coughed with a hollow rattling sound. His scrawny chest arched mightily as he fought for air.

"Tell Pat Uncle Horace sent—tell—tell—Arch Randlet—what—out—Randlet—"

Blood bubbled in his throat, slurring the following words to an unintelligible mumble. Again the chest heaved, then abruptly sank in until there was a distinct hollow between the narrow shoulders. There was a palsied twitching of the limbs, a sudden stiffening, abruptly relaxation.

Hatfield stared at the fixed eyes, at the slowing trickle of blood from the sagging mouth. Abruptly he stood up, and stared at the distant canyon mouth into which the killers had vanished.

"They done yuh in, old-timer, that's shore," he addressed the dead man. "Can't figger what it's all about, but they never gave yuh a chance."

He half turned toward the waiting sorrel, gazed again at the canyon mouth, and shook his head.

"No use tailin' 'em," he muttered. "Chances are they know every inch of the ground, and we don't, and they got a head start. Reckon they'll have to wait."

Abruptly he realized that he still held the battered hat in his hands. Recalling the dead man's words, he turned back the sweatband. There was writing on the light colored inner surface. His black brows drawing together with thought, he ripped the band free with a twist of his sinewy fingers, straightened it out and studied the crooked writing.

It appeared to be a series of misquotations from the classics.

"'Where sinks the Day Star,'" Hatfield read. "That's from Milton's 'Paradise Lost,'" he mused. "And the next is from the Book of Job, 'The place where light dwelleth.'"

Followed a third and longer quotation:

> Where Alph, the sacred river, ran
> Through caverns measureless to man
> Down to a sunless sea.

"Well, he got that one right, anyway," the Ranger muttered. "It's from Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan.'"

The concentration furrow between his black brows deepened as he head the next inscription:

> One hundred and sixty paces

The last scrawl was even more cryptic than those that went before:

> The House the Great King built. Guatemoc

Hatfield removed his own hat and ran slim fingers through his thick black hair. He stared at the bit of leather in his hand, and again shook his head.

"The 'Great King,' that was Solomon," he mused, "and Guatemoc was the last of the Aztec emperors, if I remember right—the one the Spaniards under Cortez cashed in tryin' to get Montezuma's hidden treasure, which they never got. From the looks of this mess, I'd say the old jigger, if he wrote it, was loco as a sheepherder, but he shore seemed to figger it something important. Well, mebbe that feller Pat he wanted to have it—his nephew, I reckon—can make head or tail out of it, which is more'n I can. Reckon it's up to me to find Pat and take what's left of his uncle to him."

In the course of his Ranger activities, Jim Hatfield, he whom a stern old Lieutenant of Rangers had named the Lone Wolf, had encountered many strange things. But none, he felt, quite as queer as this.

A man had been murdered, wantonly murdered, it looked like on the surface. The killers, he interpreted the dead man's words, had sought something and had made off apparently satisfied that they had it, but hadn't, according to what the old man said. The dead man had intimated that the jumble of nonsense scrawled on the inner surface of his hat band was what the killers really sought.

The whole thing did not make sense.

CHAPTER II

Shadows of the Night

HATFIELD studied the dead face. The man wore a garb typical of the desert and the rangeland—faded blue shirt, seedy overalls, high-heeled boots and a battered wide-brimmed hat. If he had carried a gun, the killers had taken it with them. There was no mark of a cartridge belt about his waist, Hatfield noted. The face, bearded and wrinkled though it was, had a clean-cut look, with a high-bridged nose and sensitive nostrils. The forehead was high and broad.

"Talked like an educated man, too," Hatfield recollected. "Well, Goldy, old-timer, this is a nice beginnin' in this section for us. Cap'n Bill McDowell said there was plenty of tarnation bustin' loose when he sent us over here to investigate what he said looked like a row among sheepmen of this section. He was right, per usual, but this looks like somethin' sort of off the trail. Well, reckon we might as well be amblin'. No tellin' how far it is to that ranchhouse north of the desert."

He got the dead man's horse, which was too weary to resist capture, and bound the body across the saddle. Then, with a last look at the dark smudge on the gray sands, he forked Goldy and rode north. How many

Hatfield hurled himself from the saddle and clutched frantically at the grab-irons
(CHAPTER VIII)

times, Hatfield wondered, had these age-old sands been darkened by spilled blood.

The sun was sinking toward the western crags and flinging reddish rays across the vast expanse of desert. As it sank lower, the lurid light grew still more darkly red, until the far reaching sands were like to a sea of blood, ominous of portent, sinister, threatening.

Hatfield felt the intangible threat as he gazed across the bloody sands. The heat was still intense and the wind from the south had fallen. But as he gazed, a breath from the north fanned his face as with the clammy fluttering of a dead hand.

The sun had set and the sky was flaming scarlet and gold when Hatfield reached the beginning of the fertile soil. The transition from the wasteland was startlingly abrupt. A belt of stony ground, a gentle descent, and the desert was flaming behind him. Ahead, to the north and east, was the rolling range, green and amber in the dying light.

The high hills to the west had fallen back until their somber wall was some miles distant. Long slopes and rounded crests ran up to the cliffs that started so abruptly into the sky. The slopes and the rises were thickly clothed with brush that straggled out just west of the trail he was following. The rangeland to the east was grass grown, with here and there clumps of thicket and parklike woodland.

As Hatfield rode northward he began passing great herds of sheep. His nose wrinkled slightly with the born cattleman's instinctive dislike for the blatting woollies, but he was forced to appreciate the size and condition of the flocks. These were not wandering stragglers under the care of a lethargic Mexican pastor or shiftless herdsman. They bespoke wealth and solidity.

"Musta been sheep country hereabouts for a heap of years," he mused. "Them hills over to the west would make fine grazing, too, and this section to the east shore would be fitted for cattle raisin'. Bet this was all cattle country once. Open range, the chances are, and sheepmen come in and took over. Got a hunch there was some stirrin' times hereabouts when that happened. Mebbe it's beginnin' all over again, but Cap'n Bill's note didn't say anything about cowmen mixed up in the row. Just said two factions of the sheepmen were gunnin' for each other. Darn sheep, anyhow!"

Another mile of riding and his brows drew together sharply. Running out of the west, then turning squarely to parallel the trail he was following, were taut lines of rusty barbed wire that extended northward farther than the eye could reach.

"Fenced range," he muttered, "and that usually makes for trouble in this country."

HE PASSED more sheep, but was interested to note that all were on the level grassland to the east of the fence. West of the wire the ground was abruptly hilly, the long slopes running upward toward the distant cliffs being thickly clothed with chaparral.

Occasional groves flanked the trail and it was after passing through one of these that Hatfield caught sight of the ranchhouse he was seeking. It sat amid tall cottonwoods and though small looked comfortable and strongly built. Off to one side was a horse corral. There were barns and a bunkhouse.

"A fenced spread, all right," mused the Ranger. "And somebody's workin' on the wire. Sort of light for that work, I'd say. Seems to have trouble tightenin' the strands. Looks like a boy. Reckon that's Pat."

He rode up to the gate, dismounted, opened it and walked through, leaving Goldy and the burdened horse standing outside. With unhurried steps he approached the fence-mender, who ceased activities and glanced in his direction. Hatfield could make little of the worker's face, due to the deceptive twilight and the broad hatbrim drawn low over the eyes. He paused a few yards distant and spoke.

"You happen to be Pat, who has an Uncle Horace?"

The fence mender nodded, but did not otherwise reply. Hatfield hesitated, gazed down compassionately a moment from his great height, then went to the point with a Texan's terse disregard for non essentials.

"Sorry to have to tell yuh, Pat, but yore Uncle Horace had a mite of bad luck this afternoon. I've got what's left of him over his hoss, outside the gate."

He was totally unprepared for the effect of his words. The slight fence-mender started, glanced toward the burdened horse and, with a gasp, slumped to the ground in a dead faint.

Hatfield sprang forward, and knelt beside the huddled form.

"Here, here, feller!" he exclaimed in his deep, musical voice. "That ain't no way for a man to act. Buck up, now, and come out of it."

The words ended in a gulp of astonishment. The Ranger lifted the slight form as he spoke. The wide hat fell off and a mass of short, red-golden curls tumbled over Hatfield's arm. The lashes of the closed eyes were so thick and long that they looked like the shadow of black lace against the pale cheeks.

"Blue blazes of Hades!" the Lone Wolf swore. "A girl!"

Gently lowering her to the ground, he ran back to his horse and got his canteen. He bathed her forehead with water, and

chafed her wrists.

"This is gettin' worse tangled by the minute," he muttered as he continued his ministrations. "The nephew turns out to be a niece. Pat! Reckon that's short for Patricia or somethin'. Blazes, ain't she ever comin' to? I'm not in the habit of talkin' out of turn where women are concerned, but I shore slipped my dally this time!"

He drew a deep breath of relief when the black lashes fluttered. They opened and great wide blue eyes stared up into his. Then, as full consciousness returned, they widened still more in an expression of terror. She shuddered as with ague and struggled to rise.

"Take it easy, ma'am," Hatfield soothed. "If I'd any notion yuh was a girl, I wouldn't have talked like that. I'm sorry, ma'am."

The girl shuddered again. Then something in the steady eyes and lean bronzed face seemed to reassure her. She sat up, passed a trembling hand across her eyes, and spoke, her soft throaty voice little above a whisper.

"It—it was seeing him again—there on his horse, like that," she said.

Hatfield helped her to her feet. She swayed for a moment, leaning heavily against his supporting arm, then stood firm.

"I'm—I'm all right now," she said.

Gently but firmly, Hatfield turned her face from the gate.

"You amble into the casa, ma'am, and I'll bring him in," he said.

She did not resist as he urged her forward. He saw that she walked steadily and mounted the veranda steps without hesitation. Then he walked to the gate, lifted the old man's body from the horse's back and carried it into the ranchhouse.

In the big main living room he deposited it on a couch and covered it with a blanket. The girl was standing near an inner door, shrinking against the wall. She drew a long, quivering breath, and gestured to a chair.

AS HATFIELD seated himself, she moved to a hanging lamp and lighted it. He noted that not even the bulky overalls could altogether hide the slender shapeliness of her figure nor the lithe grace of her movements.

As the lamp flared, the light struck glints of ruddy gold in her bright hair. Her lips, now that the color had returned to them, were soft, sweetly curved and vividly red. Her rounded cheeks were creamily tanned and there was a freckle or two powdering the bridge of her straight little nose. Her wide eyes were so darkly blue as to seem black in the lamplight.

She turned to him, her gaze steady.

"How—did it happen?" she asked quietly.

In a few terse sentences, Hatfield told her. As he spoke, the blue eyes flashed, the soft lips tightened and her rounded little white chin set firmly.

"So they finally murdered him!" she said, her voice hard with bitterness.

Hatfield regarded her for a moment. "Just who do yuh mean by 'they,' ma'am?" he asked at length.

"The sheep raisers!" she burst out, her voice shaking again. "The big herd owners of this section!"

Hatfield said nothing for a period. "Yuh got anything to base that accusation on, ma'am?" he asked finally.

"I have," she declared with emphasis. "They have said over and over they were going to drive us out, if they had to have a killing to do it."

"Why, ma'am?"

"They hate us," she declared. "They say we hold our land unjustly, that by rights it belongs to them, that we intend to take over the whole valley if we can and run them out. They say we are worse than the cattlemen with whom they fought years ago, when they first came here."

Hatfield was puzzled. "But, ma'am, don't you raise sheep, too?" he asked.

The girl shook her red head. "No," she replied. "There isn't a sheep in these hills. We raise goats."

"Goats?"

"Yes, Angora goats."

"Angora goats," Hatfield repeated meditatively. "Mohair comes from Angora goats, I believe. Right?"

"Yes, and other things. Gloves are made from their hides, and all the real Morocco leather, or so my uncle told me. Goats are what he hoped to make money from. We have some cattle, but the goats are what we depend on."

"I thought this place had the look of a cattle spread," Hatfield remarked.

"The man who originally lived here built it for cattle, I understand," she agreed. "He sold it, and all the land for miles to the north, east of the trail, to my uncle, who in turn sold part of it to friends back in Kentucky, whom he induced to come out here and join him. It was my uncle who got the idea of raising Angora goats. I believe they have never been raised in Texas before."

Hatfield nodded. "Not to amount to anything, I figger," he admitted. "Although I've heard of one or two small herds over to the southeast that somebody tried as an experiment. Understand they didn't pay."

"My uncle old me they could be made to pay," the girl replied. "Anyhow, there are nearly a dozen goat ranches to the north of here now, all well stocked."

"And the sheepmen don't like it?"

"No, it seems they don't. At first, I understand, they raised no objections, but of late they have been making trouble. They tried to buy my uncle out, and when he wouldn't sell, they threatened him. They told him the man he bought from held his land only as open range and had no right to sell.

"My uncle proved his title in the courts, he told me. But the sheepmen won't listen to reason. Uncle Horace said their own titles are none too secure, the investigation showed, just like the cattlemen east of the valley. He says all the cattle land over there is open range."

Hatfield regarded her curiously.

"You know anything much about goat raisin' and sheep raisin', ma'am?" he asked.

"No," she admitted. "I don't. I have been out here less than two months. I came to live with my uncle."

Hatfield nodded, and his brows drew together until the concentration furrow was deep between them. That was a sure sign the Lone Wolf was doing some hard thinking.

CHAPTER III

Patricia

JIM HATFIELD, listening to the girl, told himself that this was a new one. He had more than once contacted feuds between cattlemen and sheepmen, but a row between sheepmen and goat raisers was something novel in his experience.

He could understand and appreciate trouble between shepherds and cow raisers. Sheep was a word of terror to the cattlemen. Their sharp hoofs cut grassland to pieces. Also, they ate the grass down to the roots, so that it would not grow again.

By intelligent care and conservation, grassland could be kept in a healthy condition when devoted to sheep raising. Usually, though, the herders found it simpler and less expensive to move their herds from place to place, leaving the barren areas after they had been eaten over.

As a consequence, to the cattlemen, sheep meant ruin. They feared—and bitter experience had shown their fear justified—the sheep raisers from the east and their flocks of woollies. They knew, too, that when the herders came, they came to stay. They knew, because the cattlemen were themselves of the same basic stock as the emigrants from Kentucky, Virginia and the New England states. Their forebears had come to the Southwest from those very localities.

The emigrant sheepmen were just as stubborn, tenacious and courageous as the entrenched cattlemen. They were not like the Mexican pastor with his scrawny flock, who could be intimidated and driven out. They would fight for what they considered were their rights, just as the cattlemen would fight for what they considered were theirs.

And the sheep raisers had the advantage of solidarity. Their communities were compact, different from the widely spaced cattle spreads. Such a situation was packed with dynamite, as Ranger Captain Bill McDowell had warned his lieutenant when he dispatched him on his mission of investigation to the troubled section. But it looked like the cattlemen were out of this row.

"Mebbe yuh're right, ma'am, in figgering the sheepmen are yore enemies," he conceded, "but from what yore uncle managed to say to me before he died, I figgered the fellers who shot him did it to get somethin' from him—somethin', judgin' from what he said, they thought they got, but didn't."

He took the torn sweat-band from his pocket and handed it to her.

"Does this mean anything to yuh, ma'am?" he asked, and explained how it came to be in his possession.

The girl took the bit of stained leather wonderingly, and turned it over in her slender, sun-golden fingers. She shook her head in bewilderment.

"Nothing at all," she disclaimed. "It looks silly, doesn't it?"

"Looks that way," Hatfield admitted, "but yore uncle shore seemed to set stock by it. He was mighty anxious yuh should have it. I've a notion he mighta explained somethin' about it if he'd had time. Yuh never heard him talk about anything that would sort of tie up with this?"

The girl shook her head.

"I might as well tell you," she said, "that I hardly knew my uncle. He was my father's only brother. His name is—was—Horace Wainwright. As I said, I have been out here little more than a month, and I had not seen him since I was a child. My father and mother are dead, and when he wrote me recently, inviting me to come and live with him here, I accepted. I was tired of living alone and of the, to me, drudgery of office work.

"He was kind to me, but even after I came out here. I saw little of him. He was always away, riding in the hills, or superintending the ranch work. When he was at home, he spent most of his time reading, and talked little.

"My uncle, as you may have guessed, was a strange man. He was educated and had cultured tastes, but was afflicted with wanderlust. He'd traveled all over the world,

spending much time in Central America and Mexico. It was only a couple of years ago that he seemed to decide to settle down. He bought this ranch from a man who was trying to raise cattle on it. I understand he soon realized, as the former owner had learned to his cost, that the ranch could not sustain cattle in paying quantities.

"Somehow, he hit on the idea of raising Angora goats. It appears to have been a good idea. Things went along very well until the sheep raisers began to make trouble."

HATFIELD nodded, but proffered no further comment. The girl turned to the book-shelves that lined one wall of the room.

"I'm sure I can't make head or tail of this thing," she remarked, wrinkling her white forehead over the scrawled sweat-band, "but as he seemed to value it, I'll put it away in his favorite book. He was always reading it, when he wasn't reading Shakespeare or Milton or The Bible."

She took from a shelf an elaborately bound volume of Prescott's "Mexico," as she spoke, and placed the bit of leather between the leaves.

Hatfield stared at the well-stocked shelves, the concentration furrow deepening between his black brows. He was trying to reconcile the misquoted passages written on the sweat-band with a man who had undoubtedly been thoroughly familiar with them in their correct form.

"Ma'am," he asked suddenly as she replaced the volume on its shelf, "did yuh ever hear the name, Arch Randlet?"

The girl turned quickly, her eyes dilating.

"Arch Randlet!" she repeated. "He's the leader of the sheep raisers! He owns the biggest flock in the valley. Why?"

"His name was the last thing yore uncle spoke before he died," Hatfield replied bluntly.

He repeated the dying man's words, spacing them as Horace Wainwright had done in his labored speech:

"Tell—tell—Arch Randlet—watch—out—Randlet."

The girl's red lips seemed to gray. She shuddered slightly.

"I have no notion what he could have meant," she said, her voice flat, toneless.

Hatfield eyed her curiously, wondering at her singular reaction, but before he could comment, there was a clatter of hoofs outside the house.

The girl started, colored flowed back into her lips and sheeks.

"It's the herders, coming in for their supper, and it's not ready!" she exclaimed.

She was turning toward the inner door, when Hatfield reached out a restraining

The room rocked and roared to the thunder of gunfire as they went into action (CHAPTER XX)

hand. "You just stay here and take it easy, ma'am," he told her. "I'll look after things for yuh. I'm pretty handy at rustlin' a helpin' of chuck. Kitchen out thisaway?"

She gave him a grateful glance. "You are kind," she murmured. "Yes, right through the next room. You'll find everything handy, and there's a fire going in the range."

She added impulsively, holding out her hand, "I'm Patricia Wainwright."

Hatfield enclosed her slim fingers, and supplied his own name.

"Send the herders in to me when they come, please," she said as their hands fell apart.

Hatfield passed into the kitchen, where a lamp was lighted. He was stirring up the fire in the big range when the outer door opened and three men entered, casting surprised and questioning glances at the tall Ranger.

Two were grave, elderly men, the third a youngster of perhaps eighteen. Hatfield nodded to them and they returned the nods in silence.

"Yore boss wants yuh to step into the front room," the Lone Wolf told them.

With another glance at his towering form, they nodded again, and clumped toward the living room. Through the partly closed doors Hatfield heard a low murmur of conversation, then startled exclamations followed a moment later by an angry whirl of words.

The girl spoke quietly and there was silence.

"Will you please come in a moment, Mr. Hatfield?" she called a little later.

Hatfield obeyed the request, and felt the eyes of the herders hard upon him. The girl introduced them.

"This is Moreman Miller, Sam Harness, and his son Ernest," she said.

THE broad-shouldered Miller extended his hand.

"Reckon we're in yore debt for packin' pore old Horace home," he said in a deep, slow voice. The others nodded agreement.

"You didn't get a good look at any of the lobos, did yuh, son?" asked withered old Sam Harness.

"Nope," Hatfield replied soberly as he shook hands. "They were nigh onto three miles from me when I first sighted them, and they hightailed before I could get anything like close. There was considerable dust blowin', too."

He did not see fit to mention at the moment that it had struck him that the killers had forked their horses like cowboys.

"I reckon we'd some of us better ride to town and tell the sheriff, soon as we've et," remarked Miller as Hatfield turned back to the kitchen. "Not that us fellers can expect him to do anythin' for us," he added bitterly. "Wait, son, and I'll give yuh a hand out there."

Before the meal was ready, two more men rode in.

Hatfield quickly placed them as cowhands, which they turned out to be. Harper and "Stiffy" Willis. Both were old, but appeared competent. He gathered that they looked after the considerable herd of cattle on the ranch.

"We used to work for old Jerry Carrol 'fore he sold the Cross C to Wainwright," explained Harper, who was voluble. "We stayed on. Don't know just what'll happen now."

It was decided that Miller and the elder Harness would ride to town to inform the sheriff of what had taken place. Hatfield elected to ride with them.

"It ain't but about five miles," said Miller. "A right lively town, too. The county seat, and there's a railroad station and loadin' pens for cattle and sheep. Name's Huajilla, after the brush that grows so thick hereabouts, I reckon. We calls somethin' a heap like it 'catclaw' back in Kentucky."

Huajilla proved to be a typical cow and sheep country community, a gathering place for spread riders of the section who sought diversion and entertainment. There were plenty of saloons, dancehalls, gambling dives, one or two big general stores, several restaurants and a collection of shacks, 'dobes and false fronts.

Lanterns were hung on poles at frequent intervals in lieu of better lighting. Board sidewalks flanked the dusty main street. There was a bank, a courthouse and a ramshackle railroad station adjoining the long lines of loading pens and chutes. They crossed the railroad tracks to enter the town, just after a long freight train roared past with a crash of steel on steel, the clang of flashing side rods and spinning drivers, the groan and jangle of straining couplers and the staccato pound of the locomotive exhaust.

The tang of coal smoke, sizzling oil and hot metal mingled with the fragrant smell of ripe fruit and grain. Hatfield watched the bobbing red markers of the caboose vanish around a curve.

He chuckled as the lonely wail of the whistle drifted back.

"Takes a hustlin' freight train to give yuh the want-to-go-places feelin'," he remarked. Old Sam Harness chuckled creakily. Miller nodded agreement.

"Sheriff Lake Hill has his office in the front of the jail house, just around the corner," he remarked. "Reckon we stand a chance to find him there this time o' evenin'."

CHAPTER IV

Good Shootin'

SHERIFF HILL was seated in his office with his boots on the table when Jim Hatfield and his riding companions arrived. He proved to be a lanky old frontiersman with a drooping mustache, a truculent eye and hound dog chops. He bent a not too friendly glance on the two herders as they entered, and swore pungently when they stated their errand.

"Everything was plumb peaceful hereabouts 'fore you fellers started comin' into the section," he declared peacefully. "Ain't been nothin' but trouble ever since yuh started squattin' on this range."

"We ain't makin' no trouble, Sheriff, and we don't hanker for none," Miller told him mildly.

The sheriff grunted under his mustache and eyed Hatfield suspiciously.

"Yuh say yuh saw the killin'?" he asked. "Why didn't yuh do somethin' to stop it?"

"Didn't happen to have a lightnin' flash handy," Hatfield replied.

The sheriff's mustache bristled. "Don't be tryin' to get funny!" he barked. "What yuh mean by that?"

"Well," the Lone Wolf drawled, "it woulda taken an extra long-winded flash of lightnin' to reach them hellions from where I was when they threw down on Wainwright."

The sheriff sputtered and changed the subject.

"Yuh goin' to be there for the inquest come tomorrer?" he asked.

"Aim to be," the Ranger replied.

"See that yuh do," growled the sheriff. "Looks like yuh're the only witness to the killin'."

He glanced involuntarily toward the cell doors as he spoke.

"No need to lock me up," Hatfield remarked, his voice still mild, but holding a hint of derision. "I'll be there."

The sheriff reddened. "Nobody said anythin' about lockin' yuh up," he disclaimed. "I'll get a coroner's jury together in the mornin' and we'll ride out to the Carrol place and sot."

Old Sam Harness gave his customary chuckle as they reached the street again.

"Reckon Sheriff Hill just don't like nobody, less'n it might be Arch Randlet," he said.

Hatfield paused before a brightly lighted saloon.

"Got a notion I could stand a drink," he said. "What you fellers say?"

Miller and Harness hesitated. "That's a sheep raisers' drinkin' place," explained Miller. "I reckon goat herders ain't over welcome in there."

"Figger a herder's money is as good as anybody else's," returned Hatfield, as he led the way through the swinging doors.

The saloon was a big one, and pretty well crowded. There were poker tables, a lunch counter, two roulette wheels, a faro bank and a dance floor. A Mexican stringed orchestra provided music for the dancers.

High French heels clicked with artificial sprightliness in unison with the solid clump of boots. There was a cheerful clink of bottle necks on glass rims, the soft slither of shuffled cards, the click of dice and the murmuring whirr of the wheels undertoning the soft patter of the ivory ball bouncing in the slots.

Four drink jugglers were busy behind the long bar, serving thirsty patrons under the watchful eye of a portly, benign-faced individual who was evidently the proprietor.

The clatter of conversation was abruptly stilled as the tall Ranger and his two plainly nervous companions made their way to the bar. Hatfield ordered drinks for the three of them. The barkeep hesitated a moment, got the full force of the Lone Wolf's long green eyes, and reached for a bottle.

His hand shook a trifle as he poured the drinks, so that a little of the liquor sloshed over onto the shining surface of the bar. He mopped it up with jerky movements of a towel and mumbled something apologetic under his breath.

Hatfield's rather wide mouth quirked at the corners in an amused grin that flashed his even teeth startlingly white in his bronzed face. The bartender grinned back, albeit a trifle sheepishly, and suddenly appeared less flustered.

AS HATFIELD reached for his drink, he was aware of the scraping of an abruptly pushed-back chair. He turned slightly and saw a tall, huge-shouldered man rising from a poker table, his square, blocky face angry and inflamed. He had a bristle of fiery red hair, a smoldering blue eye and a tight mouth. He headed for the bar, his stride arrogant, assured, his abnormally long arms from which dangled thick, hairy hands, swinging loosely at his sides.

"It's Arch Randlet," Harness muttered nervously. "I'm scared there's goin' to be trouble."

Randlet paused directly in front of the newly arrived trio, his eyes threatening.

"See that sign over there?" he demanded harshly in a rumbling, growling voice, jerking his great head toward the rear wall.

Hatfield had noted the sign the moment

he entered the room, a rude daubing in big red letters:

GOAT HERDERS AIN'T ALLOWED

Harness and Miller shuffled their feet and looked away. Hatfield, resting elbows on the bar and leaning back at ease, nodded pleasant agreement.

"Sort of smeary, don't yuh think?" he drawled mildly.

The big man's jaw dropped an instant, then snapped shut. The angry red of his face deepened. He looked fierce, but somehow gave the impression that he felt he had missed his mark.

"That sign means just what it says!" he rumbled. "Reckon you can stay, cowboy, if yuh're a mind to, but these two fellers had better get goin'."

Hatfield continued to smile pleasantly.

"Reckon they came in with me, reckon we'll go out together—after we've finished drinkin'," he replied in the same mild, musical drawl. "Yuh happen to own this diggin'?" he added, some of the music going out of his soft tones.

"No, I don't," Randlet barked in reply. "But that don't pay no mind."

"Then get back to yore table and tend to yore own business," Hatfield shot at him, his voice suddenly as cold as steel grinding on ice.

Randlet stared, apparently unable to believe his ears. He let out a roar of fury and his huge fist shot forward, resistless as a cannon ball.

Hatfield did not shift his feet. His supple body moved slightly aside and Randlet's fist whizzed harmlessly over his shoulder. An instant later something like to the slim, steely face of a sledgehammer hit Randlet squarely in the mouth. He reeled backward, gasping, spluttering blood, crashed into a table and took it to the floor with him, splintered to matchwood.

For an instant he jerked and floundered. Then he rolled over on his side, bawling with rage, and streaked his right hand to the big Colt swinging, butt to the front, on his left hip.

In the grotesque, reaching posture, he froze, every muscle rigid, his tense fingers spread like the claws of a bird of prey. He was looking into the rock-steady muzzles of two long black guns that somehow had come naturally into Hatfield's hands.

"If yuh want to use that drawin' hand to eat with in the next three months, put it back where it was," the Lone Wolf said, his voice deadly in its silky softness.

Randlet glared a split second, saw the hammer of one of the guns begin to rise under the backward pull of Hatfield's thumb, and dropped his hand back to his side. He lay motionless, not daring to move under the threat of those yawning black muzzles.

At the same instant Hatfield's glance flickered over the room. Under the impact of that bleak stare, men who had started to rise from their chairs sank back again. The line at the bar stood rigid. The musicians gripped their instruments, the dancers halted in their tracks.

"About that sign up there—it ain't spelled right." The Lone Wolf's voice cut through the rising chorus of exclamations, deliberately stressing the garbled "ain't." "My teacher always taught me to dot an 'i'."

THE crash of a shot echoed his words. Smoke wisped up from the muzzle of the left-hand gun. A dance floor girl screamed. There was a scraping of chair legs, instinctive ducking. Then all eyes turned to stare at the offending word of the daubed sign.

No one had seen him aim. In fact nobody had noted the lightning upward flicker of the black gun barrel that was again seeming to take in each and every man in the room for individual attention. But over the undotted "i" was now a neat black hole that took the place of the missing dot.

There was a moment of stunned silence, broken suddenly by the bawling voice of an old cowboy at the end of the bar.

"Gentlemen, that's what I calls shootin'!"

A hum of applause started, rising to a roar. Hatfield, with a glance at the recumbent Randlet, sheathed his gun with effortless ease and raised his brimming glass with a hand that did not spill a drop.

The forgotten Randlet got slowly to his feet. His face was ashen now and the blood that still trickled from his cut lips showed darkly against his skin. He glared at the man who had made him look like a clumsy yokel.

"This ain't finished yet, cuss yuh!" he mouthed thickly through his puffing lips.

Hatfield nodded. "Be shore yuh're all there at the finish, Randlet," he replied.

Randlet gave him another black glare, turned and stalked through the swinging doors and vanished into the night.

"Good gosh, I never figgered Randlet would take water!" muttered the bartender at Hatfield's elbow.

Hatfield shook his head. "He didn't," he replied shortly. "His kind don't take water. But he's got brains enough not to buck a cold deck." He added reflectively, "And that makes him plumb worth lookin' out for."

After several more drinks, mostly set up by the admiring and effusive proprietor, Hatfield and the goat herders left the saloon and rode homeward under the stars.

"Yuh made a bad enemy tonight, son," said Miller. "The kind that don't forgive

and don't forget. He'll strike fast and sudden and unexpected. My advice to you is to forget all about that inquest tomorrer and keep right on ridin'."

"Got a notion it's plumb good advice," Hatfield admitted, "but I reckon my hoss is sorta tired and needs a good rest."

Goldie snorted indignant refutation of this slander. Hatfield chuckled.

They assigned Hatfield a little room that opened off the main living room as sleeping quarters. The herders repaired to the bunkhouse. Pat said good night and ascended the stairs. Hatfield was left alone with the remains of old Horace Wainwright.

He neglected to light the lamp in his sleeping quarters, the glow through the open door from the dim light in the big outer room being sufficient for his needs. He cleaned and oiled his guns, then lounged comfortably on the bed, smoking leisurely and thinking.

Over a final cigarette he half dozed, awakening with a start. An almost imperceptible but persistent sound was filtering through the silence. He sat up in bed and listened intently.

The sound, a soft clicking, seemed to come from beyond the closed outer door of the big room. Hatfield listened a moment longer, then got to his feet and glided to the door. The big room was thronged with shadows. The long figure of the dead man lay stark on the couch. The lamp guttered in a breath of air and flared smokily, causing the shadows to take unto themselves stealthy movement. The fumbling click persisted.

HATFIELD stared at the closed door. His muscles tensed. The door was no longer tightly closed. A thin line of shadow appeared between the edge and the jamb.

With almost undiscernible slowness the line of shadow widened. There was something chilly and menacing in that ever-widening black line. It was as if a grave were opening and stealthy murder creeping forth with treacherouly curved back and ready knife.

The lamp flared again, the shadows groped, the stark form of the dead man seemed to move furtively on its couch. Hatfield stared, fascinated, a prickling at the roots of his hair, a sudden clamminess moistening the palms of his hands.

The door opened still more. A solid bulk of shadow emphasized the widening black bar. Hatfield leaped forward, hands streaking to his guns. An instant too late he remembered the unshaded window across the room. He was going sideways when flame gushed through to the accompaniment of a crash of shattered glass and a booming report.

Hatfield reeled, slumped to the floor, blood pouring down his face, red fires storming before his eyes. With his last fleeting strength, he jerked his guns and crashed shot after shot at the splintered window and the half-open door. As the hammers clicked on empty shells, icy blackness closed about him, coil on strangling coil, and he sprawled headlong on top of his smoking guns.

CHAPTER V

By Persons Unknown

WHEN Jim Hatfield came back to consciousness, he was lying on his bed. Sam Harness was sponging his bloody face with a damp cloth. The old herder sighed vast relief as the Ranger opened his eyes and stared about.

"Son, for a minute I figgered we was due to have a double-barreled inquest tomorrer," Harness quavered. "How yuh feel?"

Hatfield sat up, mastering with difficulty a sudden rush of nausea, and raised exploring fingers to a shallow cut just at the hairline above his left temple before replying.

[Turn page]

"Pretty good," he answered the herder's question. 'Just a mite of a crease, I reckon. But it was almighty close to being dead center. Guess if I hadn't turned my head just as that hellion throwed down on me, he'd have made a ten-strike. Did they get away?"

"We heard hosses streakin' it up the trail right after we tumbled out on hearin' the shootin'," Harness replied. "They wasn't nobody about when we got the bunkhouse door open."

"But what happened?" demanded Pat Wainwright. "What is it all about?"

Hatfield thought she looked exceedingly charming in a soft robe that clung to her shapely little figure. Her bright curls were tumbled in wild disorder, her blue eyes wide with bewilderment and apprehension.

"Can't say for shore," the Ranger replied. "Looks like somebody was trying to bust in. They got the door unlocked and was pushin' it open when I stepped out. Musta been one of 'em peeking through the window at the same time. I saw the glint of light on his gun barrel a second before he pulled the trigger. Otherwise I reckon I wouldn't be tellin' yuh about it."

"But what did they want? Why should they be breaking in here?"

"I've a notion it was them fellers who killed Horace," old Sam put in shrewdly. "Reckon they wasn't shore they'd done him in proper and was scared mebbe he recognized 'em and might do some talkin' if he got well enough. Reckon they was sneakin' back to make shore of the job, or finish it if they hadn't already."

Patricia accepted the explanation as logical, but Hatfield, recalling Arch Randlet's look of black hate, and other things, was not sure Harness had the right answer.

Rising from the bed, Hatfield took a lamp from its bracket and walked to the front door. The beam of light disclosed a spattering of dark spots on the floor of the veranda. A clearly defined trail ran to the outer gate, where there was a deep scoring of horses' irons.

"Nicked one of the sidewinders, anyhow," the Ranger muttered. He walked along the trail a little ways but could discover no more blood spots. The hoof marks left by the fleeing drygulchers were of course mingled with the multitude of tracks scoring the well-traveled trail.

Hatfield returned to the house in a thoughtful mood, to resume his interrupted rest. Aside from an aching head as a result of the smart blow dealt him by the grazing slug, he felt no ill effects from his wound, which he decided was of little consequence.

After Patricia and the herders had departed, he thoughtfully eyed the body of old Horace Wainwright. Then, instinctively, his glance flickered to the volume of Prescott's "Mexico," which contained the sweatband with its cryptic writing. The concentration furrow was deep between his black brows when he lay down once more, after cleaning and reloading his guns. . . .

The inquest was held at the ranchhouse the following morning. The sheriff, with the coroner and members of the jury, arrived early, grave with responsibility. With them rode a slender but well-set-up young man with brown hair and a good-looking face.

"It's young Tom Elliot, Arch Randlet's cousin," Moreman Miller remarked in surprised tones.

"In the sheep business, too?" Hatfield asked.

Miller shook his head.

"Nope. Elliot raises cattle. He has a small ranch over east of the valley, the Walkin' R, I believe they call it. I got a notion there ain't over much love lost between him and Randlet, but I reckon he's sort of beholden to Randlet, from what I hear tell. Seems Randlet put up the money Elliot needed to buy his ranch and stock it, or so I heard Sarge Brampton say. Wonder what in tarnation young Elliot is doin' here?"

HATFIELD did not wonder, after watching young Elliot's glance follow Patricia Wainwright's trim figure about the room. Pat, after greeting Elliot with cold courtesy, proceeded to ignore him as utterly as if he did not exist. Hatfield suppressed a grin, but the furrow deepened between his brows.

"This business is getting worse tangled than a hair rope in a cactus patch," he told himself. "Wonder what next will show?"

Soon afterward the owners and employees of the various goat ranches began to arrive. A late arrival, who was treated with deference by his companions, was a man almost as tall as Hatfield himself. He had exceedingly bright black eyes, a dark coloring, and hair so black that a blue shadow seemed to lie on it.

Powerfully built, broad of shoulder and lean of waist, his figure was active and well knit. His mouth was hard set, his chin prominent, and he looked capable and sure of himself. Hatfield guessed his age at between thirty-five and forty.

"That's Sarge Brampton," Miller replied to the Ranger's question. "He's sort of leader of the boys. Owns the biggest ranch of 'em all—just north of the Wainwright holdin'. He don't hold no truck with the sheep raisers or the cattlemen, either, and says open they ain't enough of both of them to run him out. Reckon he means it, too. Sarge don't stand for no foolin'. A square

man to work for, though, even if he is almighty strict. Him and Horace Wainwright was right close friends. Reckon he's takin' Horace's death a mite hard."

Hatfield had already noted the hard glitter that had birthed in Brampton's black eyes as they rested on young Tom Elliot conversing with Sheriff Hill in low tones. Brampton, however, said nothing and made no move.

The jury was sworn in and listened gravely to Hatfield's account of the killing. Patricia testified that her uncle had ridden away from the ranch early the morning of his death, headed for the western hills. She could give no reason for him being out on the Tonto Desert, many miles to the south.

Nor could any other witness who was called. The happenings of the past night were recounted for the jury's edification, and created a stir of excitement and comment. The members of the body eyed Hatfield with renewed interest. A pause followed, and the coroner asked for a verdict.

The jury deliberated with much wagging of heads and low-voiced talk, and finally handed in a verdict that read:

Horace Wainwright came to his death at the hands of parties unknown. We recommend Sheriff Hill to run down the hellions quick as possible and bring them to justice. Even a goat raiser hadn't ought to get shot in the back.

Hatfield repressed a grin at this rider, typical of range country juries. He turned to nod to Sheriff Lake Hill, who came lumbering toward him.

The sheriff returned the nod stiffly, and plunged into what was uppermost in his mind.

"Yuh figger them fellers that tried to bust into the house last night was the same what did for Wainright?" he asked without preamble.

"Didn't get a look at any of them," Hatfield countered, "but who do you figger it coulda been if it wasn't them?"

"I ain't figgerin'," grunted the sheriff. "I'm wonderin'."

He tugged at his mustache, glowered at the groups of herders talking together in low tones.

"I bet," he growled, "that when I catch them killers it'll be right smack among the goat raisers. I've a notion them fellers have fallin's out of their own."

"Mebbe," Hatfield admitted. "But just the same, them jiggers who did for Wainwright didn't ride like goat raisers."

"What yuh mean by that?" bristled the sheriff.

"I mean," Hatfield replied, "that they rode like men who'd been reared to the saddle, and," he added, "I'm willin' to bet they rode cow-country rigs."

The sheriff glowered. "Yuh must figger to have almighty good eyesight, to be able to tell that from as far off as yuh say yuh were," he remarked sarcastically.

"I have," Hatfield returned briefly.

The sheriff snorted, and stalked away. . . .

THEY buried Horace Wainwright the following morning, under the cottonwoods that shaded the ranchhouse. Sarge Brampton read the service in a deep and impressive voice, and read it well.

"I hear tell Brampton was a deacon in his church back in Vermont," Moreman Miller remarked to Hatfield after the grave had been mounded.

"He's from New England, then?" Hatfield asked with interest.

"So I've heard him say," returned Miller. "He was here when I come out from Kentucky last year. Him and Horace knowed each other purty well, I take it. They was always talkin' or readin' together. Horace wasn't much of a talker, either, sort of close-mouthed feller, but agreeable enough. I wonder what Miss Pat is figgerin' on doin' now that Horace is gone? The ranch will belong to her now, I reckon."

Hatfield was enlightened relative to this matter a little later when, through the open window of the living room, he heard Patricia talking to Sarge Brampton.

"Yes, I'm going to stay on and run the ranch," she answered Brampton's inquiry as to her plans. "I don't know much about it, of course, but I can learn, and I'll have help."

"Shore yuh will," Brampton assured her heartily. "I'll ride over a couple of times a week, and the other boys will chip in to help, too. Yuh—yuh can depend on us, ma'am."

That evening, after supper, Patricia asked Hatfield to join her in the living room.

"Mr. Hatfield," she asked, "were you heading for any place in particular when you rode this way?"

The Ranger chuckled. "Just kind of passin' through, I reckon," he admitted.

"Then you have no definite plans in mind?" she persisted.

Hatfield smiled, and shook his head. The girl leaned forward and spoke earnestly.

"Then will you stay here and help me run the ranch—be my foreman for a while?"

Hatfield considered. The proposition had its attractions. It would give him an excuse for lingering in the section and, judging from recent happenings, he shrewdly surmised that further developments were quite liable to center around the Cross C Ranch.

"All right, ma'am," he accepted briefly. "I'll sign on. I'm not up on goats, but

ranch work is ranch work, and I reckon Miller and Harness can put me straight on fine points. Besides, I gather yuh have quite a few cattle that need looking after, and Stiffy and Ike don't seem to be as spry as they once was. I'll ride out with the boys tomorrer, and look things over."

Hatfield rode the range for the next three days. The Wainwright herd of cattle, though small when compared to the vast numbers that speckled the rangeland to the east, was a good one and large enough to be considered a paying proposition if handled properly.

The goats were another matter. Their numbers seemed to be legion. They were docile creatures, Hatfield quickly learned, easy to drive and did not need a great deal of looking after

"They got some things in common with sheep, though," said Moreman Miller. "One of 'em is they get scared easy, and when they're scared they'll foller their leaders anywheres, and none of 'em is over-heavy burdened with sense. You have to watch 'em to keep 'em from bustin' their legs or drownin' theirselves."

CHAPTER VI

The "Flaming Sword"

THE following afternoon, Hatfield took another course. He left the ranchhouse alone, and after circling through the western hills, veered southwest and entered the Tonto Desert. He located the canyon into which the killers of Horace Wainwright had vanished, and entered it.

The canyon proved to be a gloomy gorge walled by beetling cliffs of dark stone. In the soft ground at its mouth, Hatfield found the hoof marks of the fleeing band, but further up the canyon the trail petered out on stony, brush grown soil, nor could he locate it again. Narrow side canyons and clefts split the walls from time to time, and it was impossible to determine whether the owlhoots had turned into one of these or continued their course up the main canyon.

Nevertheless, the Lone Wolf persisted, following a faint game track that meandered through the winding gorge, the floor of which sloped ever upward, but with no corresponding lowering of its walls, which overhung the brush-grown floor in menacing masses of weatherbeaten rock.

As he rode he searched continually for broken twigs or branches or other evidence that he was on the right track. The afternoon was far advanced and the shadows were thickening in the gorge when he rounded a final turn and a towering wall reared directly in front. The canyon was a box.

Hatfield pulled up, hooked one leg comfortably over the saddle horn and proceeded to roll a cigarette with the slim fingers of his left hand.

"Looks like we follered a cold trail this time, old-timer," he told Goldy as he smoked thoughtfully and stared at the dark rampart that blocked further progress.

As he gazed, his attention fixed on a narrow ledge winding steeply up the cliff face. He studied it with calculating eyes, following its erratic course to the dizzy rim-rock far overhead. He recalled the continuous upward slant of the canyon floor during the miles he had traversed it. He noted, too, that the ledge slithered up to the crest of a blocky crag rising perhaps fifty feet higher than the comparatively level line of the rim-rock.

"Feller," he said to the sorrel, "I've a notion if we was up top there, we could get a look at this whole mess of holes-in-the-wall. That cliff is shore to be just about the highest point hereabouts."

He studied the ledge, came to a decision.

"You couldn't make it," he informed Goldy, "but I got a workin' hunch that I can. Let's see, now . . . There'd ought to be a spring over past them thickets to the left, judgin' from the green look of the brush. Suppose we amble over there and see if there ain't a place where you can take it comfortable for a spell."

He turned the sorrel's head to the south and, a few minutes later, pushed him through a fringe of growth and into a small grass-grown clearing where a spring of clear water bubbled from under a rock to form a tiny stream that soon lost itself in the thirsty soil.

"This'll do fine," he said, removing the bit from Goldy's mouth, so that he could drink and crop in comfort. "You just stick around here and put on the nosebag, feller, while I do a mite of goat work on that cliff."

The ascent of the box wall proved feasible and not particularly difficult, although there were spots where it was not pleasant to look down. Hatfield was breathing hard and his hands were sore when he at last scrambled over the crag's lip, slid down a short, steep slope and found himself on a small plateau the height of which was much greater than the rim of the canyon's side walls.

Directly in front of him the cliff dropped sheer to the feathery tops of pines, far, far below. Behind was the short slope to the rim of the crag and the dark gulf of the canyon he had just left.

As he had anticipated, he had a clear view

of the surrounding terrain. The hills to the north and south were a network of canyons and gorges interspersed with wide hollows and precipitous upstarts of naked stone. To the west, the further hills raked the sky with claws of broken stone.

"A badlands for fair," mused the Ranger, seating himself on a ledge and studying the forbidden scene. "Gents who know this section could play hide and seek with a posse all year. The kind of country owlhoots learn and decent folks steer clear of, which makes it easy pickin's for the owlhoots. Well, where one gent rides, another can foller."

WHILE the sun dipped toward the dark wall in the west, he sat tracing a map of the terrain in his mind, placing the canyon mouths he had passed during his ride, following their courses with his eyes. He saw at once that most of them were comparatively shallow boxes, including all that extended southward. But to the north several wound on beyond the range of his vision.

"And I've a hunch it was one of them snake-holes that drygulchin' bunch slid into," he decided. "The question is, which one, and where does it lead to?"

The lower edge of the sun was vanishing behind the western wall when suddenly his attention was attracted by a flaming beam of light that slanted upward from the dark hills far to the north. For some moments it blazed into the reddening sky, then vanished as suddenly as it had appeared.

"Now what in blazes?" Hatfield muttered. "Looked like somebody was up there throwin' reflections with a whoppin' big lookin' glass. That would hardly make sense, though. The sun reflectin' back from some outcropping of mica or clear quartz, more likely."

The explanation was obvious and he dismissed the incident without further conjecture. He pinched out his cigarette and gave a final glance around the little plateau before descending to the canyon floor.

Abruptly his gaze fixed on something lying a few feet from where he was sitting and almost hidden in a small crevice. Stooping, he picked it up and stared at it, the concentration furrow deepening between his brows.

It was a tiny sliver of soft wood, one end charred and blackened.

"Now what in blazes is a burnt match stick doin' up here?" he wondered aloud. "Looks like somebody else has been up here, and not so many days back, either, from the looks of this stick."

His gaze roved over the plateau, but discovered no further evidence of former occupancy. With a start he realized that the sun was completely below the horizon, the light failing fast.

"Got to be getting down if I don't want to get caught by the dark," he muttered, turning to the ledge.

A study of the plateau had convinced him that there was no other way down.

As he lowered his body over the lip of the rim-rock, he realized that he had neglected to take into account the overhang of the cliffs. Already the gulf was brimful of shadows, and before he had descended a score of yards, he was groping in a gloom that swiftly deepened to almost black dark.

Under the conditions, the going was slow and hazardous. For what seemed an eternity, he crawled and slithered in a limitless void, with the darkening sky above and a bottomless gulf of shadows beneath.

He lost all sense of distance and direction, and at times he was not even sure but that he was climbing back to the rim-rock rather than descending to the canyon floor. The strain and effort of keeping his balance on the narrow, sloping ledge was so great that it numbed his faculties and utterly confused his thought processes.

He was aching in every muscle and shaking in every nerve when at last he felt earth beneath his feet instead of crumbling stone. Absolutely spent, he sagged against the cliff face, breathing in great gulps, fighting the persisting feeling that should he step away from the rocky support, it would be to hurl himself into yawning depths that reason told him could not exist.

Suddenly something snapped him erect and instantly restored his faculties to normal. Out of the black silence in front came a sound—a small, sharp sound that he identified as the scuff of a stealthy boot heel on stone.

For long minutes Jim Hatfield stood motionless, hardly daring to breathe. He strained his ears for a repetition of the sound, but nothing more dulled the sharp edge of the silence. And yet, a subtle sixth sense told him that malevolent life was biding its time somewhere out there in the thick darkness. The cautious, involuntary sound he had heard cried of threatening stealth that groped softly toward him with deadly intent.

The slow minutes dragged past, and nothing happened. Far away sounded the mournful beautiful call of a hunting wolf. A night bird echoed the call with a weird, whickering cry. Then once again the silence descended, tangible as a muffling shroud.

HATFIELD'S senses began to entangle him in a web of self-deception. Solider shadows seemed to start and move in the black curtain of the dark, drawing nearer with wild-beast furtiveness, melting back into the further gloom.

The rushing of blood in his veins took on the semblance of sibilant breath against his ear. He seemed to feel the heat of a body close to his. His muscles ached with the strain of tense inaction. The unending suspense became unbearable and he decided to take a chance.

Slowly, taking the greatest care that his garments should not brush against the cliff, he stooped, and groped softly until his hand encountered a loose stone. With a quick movement he tossed it several yards along the cliff. It fell with a clatter that seemed loud out of all proportion to the size of the missile.

Instantly the silence was shattered by a crash like the crack of doom. A lance of fire split the darkness. Hatfield heard a bullet smack against the cliff face. In a flicker of movement he drew his guns and fired at the flash, shifting position the instant that he pulled the trigger.

His ears were deafened by the roar of his own guns beating back from the cliff wall. It was seconds before his head stopped ringing and his hearing returned to normal. He strained to catch a sound, gun muzzles jutting forward, fingers tense on the triggers.

The silence remained upbroken for a minute or more. Then to his ears came a sharp, rhythmic clicking that faded swiftly down canyon and died away. It was the beat of a fast ridden horse's irons on the hard floor.

Hatfield listened a moment longer, then straightened up and holstered his guns. He was confident now that the stealthy prowler of the night was gone.

"The hellion heard me climbin' down the cliff, but couldn't quite place where I was in the dark," he muttered. "Reckon he figgered I was comin' along under the cliff, and he wasn't waitin' 'till he could be plumb shore just where I was. Expected me to turn down the canyon, probably, and thought he could see me when I stepped out of the shadow of the cliff Then he woulda let me have it. If he hadn't hit his foot against a rock when he shifted position, the chances are it would have worked out.

"What in blazes was he doin' up here, anyhow? Did he tail me into the canyon but hung back so far he didn't round the bend in time to see me climbin' the cliff? He couldn't see me once I got on top, of course, on account of the rim above the plateau.

"Reckon he was quite a mite puzzled as to where I disappeared to, but figgered I'd have to show up here at the trail sooner or later. This game track is about the only way a feller could ride through the canyon in anything like comfort. But the big question is, who in blazes was he? And if he follered me up here, why?"

No answer to either question presented itself at the immediate moment. With a disgusted growl, he groped his way toward the little clearing where he had left Goldy. He rode slowly and carefully down the canyon, his senses alert. He did not believe the unseen night prowler would try to drygulch him in the canyon, but he was taking no chances.

Hatfield heard an interesting bit of news the following evening.

"Saw yore friend, Arch Randlet while I was over to town this afternoon," remarked old Stiffy Willis, who had heard about Hatfield's run-in with the sheep baron. "He was carryin' his left arm in a sling. Hear tell the night he had that little shindig with you, he was cleanin' his gun when she went off accidental and nicked him in the shoulder. Seems he'll have to lay off from trouble raisin' for a few days. That don't hear bad, eh? Though," he added, with an admiring glance at the Lone Wolf's tall form, "I've a hunch Randlet'll be the lucky one if it keeps him from tanglin' with you again."

Hatfield's eyes narrowed thoughtfully at the news.

"Let's see," he remarked, "that was the same night them hellions tried to bust into the ranchhouse. And one of 'em left a trail of blood spots across the porch when they hightailed."

Stiffy stared at Hatfield a moment, rasped his bristly chin with a calloused forefinger, and wagged his grizzled head.

"By gosh, yuh're right," he grunted. "Uh-huh, yuh shore plugged one of 'em, all right, but not hard enough to keep him from ridin' off. Now I wonder?"

Hatfield was doing some wondering, too, but his only comment was:

"Things are apt to happen to folks who handle their hardware careless-like."

CHAPTER VII

Vanished Words

BRAMPTON, owner of the big goat ranch north of the Cross C, was a frequent visitor at the ranchhouse. He was courteous to Hatfield, but the tall man felt that Brampton resented his taking charge of the spread.

Pat Wainwright also sensed Brampton's attitude.

"Sarge is the acknowledged leader of the herders," she explained to Hatfield. "Also, he was friendly with Uncle Horace. Doubtless he figured I should lean on him and go to him for help and advice. I guess I've been taking care of myself for too many

years to lean on anybody. Dad died seven years ago, when I was not quite fifteen, you know, and Mother died when I was little more than a baby. I've been on my own ever since Dad died, and I suppose it has become second habit to rely on myself. I was with Uncle Horace hardly long enough to get out of the habit."

"Always good to be independent," Hatfield agreed, "but there's such a thing as carryin' it a mite too far, I reckon. For instance, I don't see any sense in you being so uppity with young Tom Elliot when he comes around. Tom wants to be friendly."

"I don't want to be friendly with him," Patricia replied tartly. "I don't see what he keeps hanging around here for!"

"He and young Ernest Harness are bunkies," Hatfield replied, stifling a chuckle. "Tom ain't much older'n Ernest, yuh know. Reckon he drops around to gab with Ernest."

Patricia's rejoinder had to be catalogued as nothing more dignified than a sniff. This time Hatfield did not bother to repress a chuckle. Pat gave him an indignant glance.

"Why should I bother to be friendly with To—with Elliot?" she demanded. "He's Arch Randlet's cousin, isn't he?' And didn't Randlet threaten to harm my uncle after he found he could not run him off his land by lawful and orderly means? How do I know Elliot isn't hand-in-glove with Randlet and all his crooked schemes? And the cattlemen are no friends of ours, either."

"Mebbe yuh're right," Hatfield was forced to admit. "But young Tom shore looked like a sick calf caught in a thunderstorm when you went off and left him alone in the livin' room this afternoon. When he rode off later, after yuh didn't come back, I figger he was low enough to walk under a snake without brushin' a scale."

Later when Pat had gone upstairs, Hatfield took the ornately bound volume of Prescott's "Mexico" from the shelf and curiously turned the pages. He found a number of passages underlined with pencil. One in particular attracted his interest. It read, in part:

> After the murder of Guatemoc, the remnant of his followers, all that was left of a once great people, escaped secretly from the besieged and ruined city and vanished, by way of an ancient trail, into the unknown north.

Hatfield read the passage over several times, his eyes dark with thought, then turned the pages with definite purpose. Abruptly he held the book by the binding boards and shook it vigorously. Again he turned the pages, with greater care. At length, however, he closed the book and for some minutes sat staring through the dark square of the open window, the concentration furrow deep between his brows.

"Well, anyhow, I remember every word that was written on it," he remarked aloud, apropos of the sweat-band from old Horace Wainwright's hat.

Patricia had stored it between the pages of the volume he held in his lap. He was glad indeed that the mysterious scrawl was inscribed so indelibly on the tablets of his memory.

For the sweat-band itself was gone!

A FEW days later, Hatfield contacted Tom Elliot in a Huajilla saloon. Elliot greeted him cordially and over their drinks they discussed local range matters.

"The whole section's settin' on top of a powder keg and wonderin' who's goin' to strike the match," Elliot declared.

"Yuh mean the trouble between the sheepmen and the goat herders?" Hatfield prompted.

Elliot nodded gloomily. "Uh-huh, that's at the bottom of it. The sheepmen are nervous as a rabbit in a hound dog's mouth, and the cattlemen ain't much better."

"But why?" Hatfield asked. "Looks like a lot of smoke for so little burnin'. Why are the sheepmen so het up because the goat raisers are here? And what've the cattlemen got to do with it? As I understand, the cattle spreads are way over beyond this valley, twenty miles or more."

"It's a funny tangle," Elliot replied. "Mebbe I can give yuh the straight of it. The sheepmen came into this valley about ten years back. It was all open range, which is better for cows. Well, at first there was one thunderation of a row. The cowmen tried to drive the shepherds out, and there was a heap of fightin' and a killin' or two. I reckon all the spread owners of the section were in it except old Jerry Carrol who owned the Cross C.

"It kept up for quite a spell, but the sheep raisers kept comin' in. Finally I reckon both sides began to get a sufficiency. Anyhow, they sort of got together and patched up a truce.

"The sheepmen fenced the valley and agreed to stay inside the fence. The cattlemen moved all their stock over to the high range east of the valley. Old Jerry Carrol didn't offer any objections when the sheepmen ran their line of fence just west of the trail, and it looked like things was goin' to be plumb peaceful."

"But it didn't last?"

"Nope. Though things did settle down for a spell. Then the goat herders began to show up and the rukus started again. That was after old Jerry Carrol sold out to Horace Wainwright and Wainwright went in for goats."

"Carrol didn't raise goats, then?"

"Nope, Carrol raised cattle, after a fashion. He came here not long after sheepmen began to show up. Drifted in and nested down on the hill range. Nobody knowed where he come from or anythin' much about him. He was a funny feller. Never mixed, never talked with nobody. Sort of a hermit. Didn't seem to care about anything but his books and wanderin' around in the hills. Raised good cattle, but never sold many—just enough to keep him goin'.

"Never had to do with anybody till Horace Wainwright showed up a coupla years back. Him and Carrol got to be real bunkies. Wainwright was a readin' feller, too, it seems, just like Carrol. It was Carrol stocked the ranchhouse with books. Figger Wainwright dropped his loop on some, too, but most of them on the shelves over there belonged to Carrol.

"All the time, it turned out, Carrol, was dyin' from the effects of a gunshot wound he got down in the Border wars. Seems that when he saw he wasn't due to last much longer, he made a deal with Wainwright and sold out to him—sold all the land west of the trail and runnin' way back into the hills, or that's what everybody figgered at the time."

"What yuh mean by 'at the time'?"

Elliot paused to drain his glass and shove it forward for a refill.

"That's where the funny part comes in," he replied. "When Wainwright bought Carrol out and started raisin' goats, there wasn't much said, but after he started bringin' in other folks—that big feller Sarge Brampton was the first to arrive—Arch Randlet started pawin' dust and r'arin' up on his hind legs. He had a lawyer feller talk to Wainwright and try and buy him out. Wainwright wouldn't sell.

"So Arch goes to court and tries to prove that Carrol, who sold to Wainwright, was just a nester, that the sheepmen held all the valley plumb west to the hills by right of prior settlement and improvements. You know that sort of claim has often been upheld in the courts.

"Arch at the same time was makin' arrangements to buy the valley, which he figgered to be open range, from the state. Well, he run smack up against a snag. Old Jerry Carrol wasn't no nester a-tall. He bought his land from a family down in Mexico who really owned the land on a grant which the courts had confirmed fifty years ago. They were well off down below the Line and had never took the trouble to put their holdin's up here to any use, though they'd paid their state taxes regular.

"Added to that, it looked like Carrol's deed might cover the whole valley in addition to the hill lands Carrol settled on. That angle is still bein' considered by the courts over to the capital. What the final outcome will be nobody knows for shore, but it puts the sheepmen in the valley in a mighty ticklish position. If the case goes against them, the sheepmen stand to lose their holdin's, if Patricia Wainwright cares to press the claim."

HATFIELD'S dark brows drew together. The situation was even more grave than he had thought.

"And I can see why the cattlemen over east are sort of jittery," he remarked with conviction.

"Uh-huh, you get it." Elliot nodded. "If the sheepmen lose the valley, they'll have to move their flocks. And where they goin' to move 'em? Desert to the south; the worst kind of hill country to the north. The only place for 'em to go is east onto the open range—cattle range. The cattlemen won't take kind to that, and the war'll start all over."

"And nobody's feeling over-friendly to the goat raisers," Hatfield summed up. He asked a sudden question. "You know anything about goat raisin', Elliot?"

The young cattleman shook his head. "Never saw one before they come here," he admitted. "All I know about the critters is they look sorta like sheep with long wool."

"And does yore cousin, Arch Randlet, and the other sheepmen know anything about goats?"

"Reckon not," Elliot replied. "I know almost for sure Cousin Arch don't."

"And why," demanded the Lone Wolf, "didn't Randlet and the other sheepmen get together with the goat herders and come to some sort of an agreement? Why didn't they find out that the goat raisers wanted their land, instead of taking the bit in their teeth and chargin' ahead before they knew just where they stood?"

Elliot shifted uncomfortably.

"Old Horace Wainwright did try to get together with Arch," he admitted. "He sent Sarge Brampton to talk to Arch. But it seems it was no go. Arch is used to havin' his own way, and he didn't aim to have no dealin's with goat herders. That was when he was figgerin' he could bull it through and drive Wainwright out.

"Reckon he wouldn't even give Brampton a chance to talk. Right after that he sent word to Wainwright that he didn't want to have to truck with him and to get out of this section. The other sheepmen kind of look to Arch as the bell-wether of the flock and foller his lead. They served notice to the goat herders to keep out of the valley. Reckon they'd even try to keep 'em outa this town if they could, but Sheriff Hill, who's a square-shooter even if he don't care much for goat herders, told 'em that the

trail to town was a public road and that the goat herders had a right to come to town whenever they seen fit.

"Hill mebbe ain't over long on brains, but he don't bluff, and everybody knows it. He says he won't stand for no trouble in town and will go gunnin' for anybody that starts it. I heard he give Arch holy blazes for makin' trouble in the First Chance Saloon that night."

"Arch Randlet from this section originally?" Hatfield asked.

Elliot shook his head. "Nope. Our family belonged up in the Panhandle. Cousin Arch was always a sky-hooter. Left home when he was a boy and, he says, spent most of his time over in the Big Bend country 'fore he come up here with his sheep. There was a mite of family business which concerned him and me after Mother died, who was his first cousin, and that's what brought me down here."

Elliot made no effort to elaborate his business connections with Randlet, and Hatfield refrained from asking questions the other man might construe as too personal.

"Well, that's the first real line-up I've got on what's goin' on in this section," the Ranger mused as he rode slowly homeward. "Looks fairly simple, on the face of it. Just a case of gettin' the various factions together for a sensible understandin', with justice for everybody.

"But there's a loose bit of twine bangin' about that complicates things. And that is —who in blazes killed old Horace Wainwright, and why?"

CHAPTER VIII

Drygulched

IN THE course of Hatfield's activities, while on the Cross C spread, he arrived at two conclusions. The first was that the Cross C cattle were much more numerous and valuable than Patricia Wainwright suspected. The western section of the range was a maze of canyons and gorges, grass-grown, well-watered, seemingly interminable in their windings deep into the higher hills. In these cool, sparsely wooded canyons, dogies, steers and fat beefs had found sanctuary.

Old Jerry Carrol, the original owner, had undoubtedly paid little attention to his holdings and had allowed them to increase to a degree unsuspected by his neighbors. The old recluse living with his books and his memories, knowing his time in the world was short, hadn't bothered with range matters.

He had had, it appeared, a worthy successor in Horace Wainwright who, Hatfield suspected, had been equally eccentric. Wainwright had, too, it was evident, been obsessed with his idea of raising Angora goats for profit.

The idea, so far as Hatfield could gather from his conversation with the herders, was a good one, although it would be some time before the goat venture would begin to show a profit.

But the Ranger, born a cattleman, could not overlook the opportunity for immediate income were the Cross C stock handled properly.

Hatfield's second conclusion dealt with old Stiffy Willis and Ike Emerson. Stiffy and Ike, Hatfield decided, had undoubtedly been spry and efficient waddies in about the time of Hatfield's grandfather. Now, however, the decrepit old-timers could do little more than potter about and occupy themselves with routine chores that required scant initiative or physical effort. Rounding up for market the cows in the western brakes was utterly beyond their abilities.

Hatfield was thinking over these matters several days after his talk with Tom Elliot. He had worked farther to the north than ever before and was diagonaling away from the western hills after ascertaining that the canyons would stand plenty of working. He intended to circle across the more open range to the east until he reached the wire and then follow it back to the ranchhouse.

The chunky little bay he was riding was tiring after a hard day of scrambling among the slopes and the canyon rocks. Goldy would have made easy going of it, but Hatfield preferred not to risk the sorrel's legs in rough ranch work needlessly.

"We'll turn south in a minute, now, feller," he assured the bay. "'Fore long yuh'll have a chance to put on the nosebag and take it easy for a spell. It'll be easy goin' from here on."

He turned and glanced back toward the somber slopes as he spoke. Abruptly his gaze centered on what appeared to be movement in the dense, low brush that clothed the first swale starting up from the level range. He studied it for a moment, then, in a startling blur of action, hurled himself sideward in the saddle until his body was behind the horse's neck and his bridle hand almost touching the ground.

And even as he swung his off-foot free from the stirrup, something yelled through the space his body had occupied the instant before.

That shattering screech, the sound of a highpower rifle bullet splitting a crack in the air nearby, is never forgotten. And Jim Hatfield had heard it before. Without taking time to look back, he raked the bay's

haunch with a spur and gave him a stinging slap on the shoulder. The startled and indignant horse snorted, slugged his head above the bit and shot forward at a dead run. Hatfield hugged his neck, twisted and glanced back.

A half-dozen or more horsemen were bulging from the brush that clothed the slope. Puffs of smoke mushroomed up from their hard-riding ranks, and to Hatfield's ears came the crack of the distant rifles.

Bullets continued to storm by. One fanned the Ranger's cheek with its lethal breath. The horse squealed with rage and pain as another nicked a hunk of meat from his sensitive flank. He bounded half his height in the air, landed with a jolt that almost unsaddled his clinging rider, and increased his speed.

Hatfield's hand automatically groped for his Winchester. Then he swore bitterly. The light rig which the bay wore was devoid of a saddle-boot. The long gun was at the ranchhouse. Hatfield loosened one of his big Colts in its sheath, but he knew that the six was useless against the rifles of the pursuers. There was but one thing to do, and he proceeded to do it.

REGAINING his seat and crouching low to provide the smallest possible target, he strove to get the last bit of speed from the flying bay.

The ground at the foot of the slope was rough and broken, and for a time the little horse held his own and even gained on his pursuers. But it was different when the distant riders reached the level rangeland and were able to let their mounts out. Slowly but surely they closed the distance. Lead again began to come close, although for the most part the drygulchers held their fire, confident, evidently, that they would soon be within easy rifle range and could make their shots count.

Hatfield anxiously scanned the ground ahead for some thicket or clump of stone where he could make a stand. He suffered no illusions as to what would be his fate once the pursuing horsemen closed the distance. He had a vivid recollection of old Horace Wainwright slumping from his saddle to lie dying on the bloody sands of the Tonto Desert. He had a growing conviction that his pursuers were the men who had drygulched Wainwright, or were at least connected with the outfit.

"The hellions are out to make a killin'," he muttered as he urged the bay to greater speed. "And if somethin' doesn't break for me mighty soon, they got a right good chance to cash in on their hand." He frowned grimly as a passing slug ripped the sleeve of his shirt.

The pursuit was coming up from the southwest, and Hatfield was forced to veer more and more to the north. Abruptly he caught sight of the wire which separated the Cross C from the sheepmen's range.

Beyond it was the gray ribbon of the trail and the twin gleams of the railroad which paralleled it.

Suddenly he saw something else. Just beyond a grove half a mile or so to the south, was an advancing plume of black smoke. A northbound train was roaring up the valley.

An instant later the great locomotive of a long freight burst into view from behind the grove.

Hatfield's lean jaw tightened with decision. Here was a chance, a slim and desperate one, but nevertheless a chance. He turned the bay's head directly toward the wire, leaned lower in the saddle and tightened his grip on the bridle. He calculated the height of the taut rusty strands and wondered if the little horse could take it. If he couldn't . . . Hatfield shrugged his broad shoulders, and sent him at the fence.

The bay took it—took it gallantly, although his hind hoofs grazed the topmost strand and he landed on floundering feet. By a miracle of horsemanship, Hatfield kept him from falling, regained his balance and turned him into the trail.

The freight was coming fast, its engine exhaust thundering, the great drive wheels a spinning blur, the side rods clanging a wild song. With a crash of pounding steel and a bellow of escaping steam, the engine flashed past the speeding horse. The long line of boxcars rumbled after, swaying and lurching with a clank of couplers and a jangle of brake rigging.

Hatfield coughed in the swirl of the acrid coal smoke, and veered the bay from the trail. A moment later and the little horse was pounding northward over the prairie, the rocketing box-cars almost grazing his shoulder, his flying hoofs barely missing the protruding ends of the cross-ties.

Hatfield swung his left leg over the bay's withers and stood on his right foot in the stirrup, estimating with keen eyes the speed of the cars roaring past.

"Got to catch the head end of a car, otherwise I'll get whipped in between 'em and ground into sausage," he thought.

An instant later he hurled himself from the stirrup and clutched frantically at the grab-irons laddering up the side of the car.

With a crash his body slammed against the car with stunning force. His arms were almost jerked from their sockets, the grip of one hand was torn free from the grab-irons by the shock. By the fingers of a single hand he swayed and dangled, pounded by the lurching car, with death blazing at him from the rifles of the pursuing owlhoots, and yawning up from the pounding wheels.

IN A writhing contortion that took every ounce of his great strength, he swung his body toward the space between the cars. His groping hand got a grip on the ladder bolted to the end of the car. He let go with his other hand and swung in between the cars. Gasping for breath, he he crouched on the end sill. He could hear, above the roar of the wheels, the spat of bullets against the side of the car. But he was out of sight of the pursuers, protected by the ponderous bulk of the box. A minute later he took a chance and peered around the corner of the car.

The owlhoots were streaming back toward the hills. Hatfield could see their furious gestures and could imagine their vivid profanity as they voiced their disappointment and disgust. He chuckled as he settled into a more comfortable position on the end sill.

"Not this time," he muttered, "but it was close, almighty close. Looks like I'm singled out for special attention. But why? Of course Arch Randlet is on the prod against me for what happened that night in the First Chance Saloon, but I don't figger he'd go to this length just to pay off a grudge. No, there's something deeper back of it. And I'll bet a peso it's somethin' to do with Wainwright's killin' and that darn missin' sweatband from his hat!"

The freight train continued to roar northward. Hatfield at first contemplated making his way across the car tops to the engine, but decided against the move. To do so would necessitate explanations which he preferred to avoid. The fireman had not been at his window when the engine flashed past the scene of the encounter. He had been down on the deck putting in a fire. The caboose had still been out of sight behind the grove. There was a good chance that the trainmen had not noticed the incident.

The northern hills drew nearer as dusk began to fall. Craning his neck around the edge of the forward car, Hatfield saw beyond where the wire turned east, the dark opening in the hills which was the pass, into which the railroad dived.

He saw something else. Near the mouth of the pass looming grotesquely in the half-light, was the pot-bellied bulk and spidery legs of a water tank.

A moment later the thunder of the engine's exhaust abruptly stilled. The train slackened speed as brake shoes ground against the wheels, and jolted to a stop. The Ranger heard the clang of the descending spout as the fireman swarmed onto the tender top and prepared to fill the locomotive's tank with water.

When he was sure he would not be observed from the engine, Hatfield slipped from his perch and stepped behind a clump of brush. After the train had proceeded on its way, he walked along the tracks until he was some distance above the tank.

There he settled himself comfortably to await the coming of a south-bound freight. A couple of hours later, when it ground to a stop beside the tank, he slipped aboard for the ride to Huajilla.

CHAPTER IX

Hidden Words

LONG past midnight, Hatfield, weary and footsore from unaccustomed walking in his high-heeled riding boots, reached the Cross C ranchhouse. A light burned in the living room, and when he entered, Pat Wainwright sprang from a chair and advanced to meet him, her blue eyes wide with apprehension.

"Jim!" she exclaimed in tones of relief. "What in the world happened to you? Your horse came home hours ago, and he was hurt. Ike and Stiffy and Ernest Harness are riding the hills right now, searching for you."

Hatfield smiled down at her from his great height. He found her solicitude for his welfare very pleasant.

"Just a mite of a shindig," he replied. In a few brief sentences he told her what had occurred.

"But why should anybody want to kill you?" she asked.

Hatfield shook his head. "Can't say for shore, yet," he replied. "Funny things seem to be goin' on in this section. Reckon it'll take a mite of thinkin' out." He turned toward the kitchen. "I'll just rustle a bite of chuck, and then, if yuh don't mind, ma'am, we'll have a little talk."

But Patricia was before him. "I'll get your supper for you," she said.

"But ma'am, I can 'tend to it," the Ranger protested. "Yuh don't need to bother."

"I don't believe in a man coming home from work and preparing his own meals," she told him firmly. "You sit down and rest. I'll call you when things are ready."

Hatfield gave her a slightly startled glance, but refrained from further comment.

After the meal was over, Hatfield came directly to the subject he wished to discuss.

"Ma'am," he said, "yuh need to hire a few hands."

Pat looked at him in surprise, and with a trace of irritation.

"Oh, for goodness sake, stop calling me 'ma'am'!" she exclaimed. "I'm not a schoolteacher, and you know my name! But why do I need more hands?"

Hatfield stifled a chuckle.

"It's like this—Pat," he said, speaking gravely enough, but with a slight twinkle in his green eyes. "Yuh got a nice lot of beefs runnin' loose in them canyons over to the west. They ought to be marketed, but it's a good deal of a chore to get 'em out and round up a trail herd. Fact is, yuh got enough steers to make it the plumb sensible thing to keep five or six good cowhands on the job all the time. This ain't a bad cattle ranch, even if it is branded as a gatherin' place for goats."

Pat considered the matter. "But where can I get the extra hands?" she asked.

"Roundup time for most of the big spreads is about over," Hatfield replied. "There'd ought to be quite a few good chuckline riders drifting into town soon. I don't figger to have any trouble fillin' our string."

"Very well, then," the girl agreed. "By the way," she added abruptly, "I have to ride to town tomorrow. The lawyer who is handling Uncle Horace's estate wants to see me. Will you ride with me, Jim?"

"Got to do whatever the boss says, I reckon," Hatfield replied without the suspicion of a smile.

Pat cast him an exasperated glance. "I didn't order you to do it," she snapped.

"Reckon yuh aren't redheaded for nothing." The Ranger grinned. "Shore I'll be glad to ride with yuh. By the way, Pat," he added, assuming a graver mien, "did yuh by any chance take that old sweat-band out of the book yuh put it in the night I gave it to yuh?"

"Why, no," the girl replied in surprised tones. "I never even thought of it again. Is it gone?"

Hatfield nodded. "Looks that way," he admitted. "I was looking through the book last Wednesday night, and it wasn't there."

Pat stared at him, wrinkling her white forehead. "Last Wednesday," she repeated, musingly. "Why—why wasn't it last Wednesday I left Tom Elliot alone in the room all afternoon? I remember you remarking on it."

"Reckon it was," Hatfield agreed, "but that ain't sayin' Elliot took it. Mebbe it was gone before that. I just happened to look Wednesday night."

THE girl nodded, her eyes suddenly sombre. "But what in the world would anybody want with that thing?" she wondered.

"I dunno—yet," Hatfield replied. "But yore Uncle Horace seemed to set a heap of store by it. And I've been thinkin' mebbe them hellions who tried to bust into the house the night yore uncle was killed was after it. Let's see a minute, now—"

He took a sheet of paper from a nearby table and jotted down from memory the misquotations scrawled on the mysterious band. For some time he sat studying the cryptic words:

Where sinks the Day Star
The place where light dwelleth.

Where Alph, the sacred river, ran
Through caverns measureless to man
Down to a sunless sea.

One hundred and sixty paces.

The House the Great King built. Guatemoc.

"Pat," he said at length, "I've a notion this thing is a cipher, or rather, a cryptogram. Yore uncle used symbols of some sort to tell somethin' he didn't want everybody to know. He died before he could give me the key. I've a notion its plumb important to you in some way. I reckon somebody else figgers it's important to them, too," he added grimly. "Unless all signs fail, they killed yore uncle tryin' to get the information hid in this thing."

He continued to study the written words. "'Where sinks the Day Star,'" he quoted. "The Day Star is the sun, and the sun sinks in the west. Which isn't over specific to go by. 'One hundred and sixty paces.' That's plain enough. But doesn't figger to mean much without a start point. One hundred and sixty paces from where?"

Abruptly he turned to the book shelves and took down Wainwright's well thumbed copy of the Bible. He opened it at the First Book of Kings and turned the pages until he found the passage he sought:

He built also the house of the forest of Lebanon; the length thereof was an hundred cubits, and the breadth thereof fifty cubits, and the height thereof thirty cubits . . .

Pat glanced at him wonderingly as he laid the Book down.

"A cubit is eighteen inches, say two cubits to a pace," he mused aloud. "That would mean fifty paces straight out after measuring off one hundred and sixty paces, then twenty-five paces at right-angles, then fifteen paces, or forty-five feet, straight up, or that's the way I'd put the darn thing together. The big question is, where to start measurin' from?"

Pat leaned over the writing on the paper and put a pink fingertip on the third quotation.

"I'd say that meant an underground river somewhere," she hazarded.

"Looks that way," Hatfield admitted. "But what do yuh make of what goes before—'The place where light dwelleth?'"

Pat shook her bright head. "It's too much for me," she replied. "I give up."

"Somewhere west of here, at a place where light dwells, then start measuring from an underground river and we get there, wherever 'there' is," the Ranger growled. "And what's there when we get there? But whatever it is, seems like it's enough to kill a man over."

"'The place where light dwelleth?'" Pat repeated. "Could that possibly mean the site of some volcanic fire, I wonder?"

Hatfield shook his head. "No sign of volcanic activity in these hills," he demurred. "Nothing plutonic, even basaltic, about those rocks, and that's a condition yuh always find where there's volcanic activity. Nope, I thought of that, but it doesn't tie up. Just the same," he added thoughtfully, "I've a plumb hunch the key to the whole riddle is in that second quotation which isn't quoted right. She's shore a puzzler, all right." He asked suddenly, "By the way, what kind of handwritin' did yore uncle have, Pat?"

"It was like print," the girl replied. "He wrote a beautiful hand."

"Then," the Lone Wolf declared with conviction, "I'll bet a hatful of pesos yore uncle never wrote that stuff on the hat-band. It was a regular crabbed scrawl, as yuh'll recollect."

"That's right." The girl nodded. "Come to think of it, the writing wasn't anything like his."

"Worse and worse!" the Ranger growled. "Oh, blazes! Let's go to bed. We'll want some sleep if we're goin' to ride to town today, and it's getting along toward daylight. Hope Ike and the fellers don't spend all day ridin' around in the hills lookin' for me. Think I'll slip over to the bunkhouse and tell Moreman Miller to hightail out and round 'em up soon as it comes daylight."

AFTER completing the chore, Hatfield went to bed, but not to sleep for some time. Through his head kept running a maddeningly elusive phrase that didn't seem to make any sense, no matter how he considered it:

"The place where light dwelleth! The place where light dwelleth!"

Hatfield and Patricia rode to town the following afternoon. The old frontier lawyer whose office they visited came to the point without needless delay.

"You are undoubtedly yore uncle's heir, ma'am," he said. "The court is satisfied as to that, and it is my duty to hand the property over to yuh. Here are the papers yuh're to sign. I congratulate yuh on comin' into what appears to be a valuable property."

"Now as to the cash yore uncle had on hand. Yuh'll see it's a mighty small amount. I reckon he'd figgered on borrowin' on the property to meet expenses until his investment began payin'. The land he sold to the other herders who came in enabled him to meet the notes due the Carrol estate for the land he bought from old Jerry. He was all clear the first of the year, but it just about cleaned him. That's the way the situation stands at present. You are the owner of the property west from the sheepmen's wire to the foot of the west slope of the Tonto Hills. Yore western boundary isn't over-well defined, but I reckon it don't make no difference, much.

"Anyhow, yuh own the Tonto Hills north from the desert to the Huajilla Hills, which runs east and west from just south of the pass the railroad runs through. The Huajillas, like the grassland to the east, is open range, so far as anybody knows. Of course, if the court over to the capital decides Carrol's holdin's included the whole Tonto Valley, yuh're settin' mighty purty, but don't bank on that. At the rate the court over there moves, yore grandchildren may benefit from the decision, but you aren't particularly likely to."

Patricia signed the necessary papers and she and Hatfield shook hands with the lawyer and left the office. Outside, the girl stared blankly at the Ranger.

"It looks like I have a property, but nothing to run it with," she observed. "There are only a few dollars in the bank. What am I going to do, Jim?"

"Nothing to worry about," the Lone Wolf replied cheerfully. "If yuh had to, I got a notion yuh could borrow from the bank, with the spread as security, but I don't figger yuh need to. What yuh want to do is get a trail herd rounded up and ship it. That'll give yuh enough ready cash to keep goin' till next Spring, when it's time to shear the goats and market the kids. The first thing is to drop a loop on a few good cowhands. I'll be only too glad to look after that chore for yuh."

The girl gave him a grateful look, but Hatfield did not notice the expression in her blue eyes. He was staring down the street to where two men, talking earnestly together, were just entering a dingy little saloon.

Hatfield's black eyes drew together as the men vanished through the swinging doors. The two big men, who appeared to be on excellent terms, were Arch Randlet and Sarge Brampton!

As he anticipated, Hatfield had little trouble hiring half a dozen efficient young cowboys who had drifted into town and who jumped at the chance for a steady job in the slack season. He set them to work immediately, combing the brakes and canyons of the western range and getting a trail herd together.

CHAPTER X

Rustlers Strike

NEWS of the activity on the Cross C aroused considerable comment among the goat raisers, and a decided difference of opinion as to the advisability of the course.

Sarge Brampton did not like it, and wasted no time in emphatically expressing his opinion to that effect. As a result, a considerable scene ensued at the Cross C ranchhouse.

"It's all plumb nonsense," Brampton declared. "It's a plumb waste of time and money. What yuh ought to be doin', Pat, is hirin' more herders to look after yore goats. Goats are where the big money is. Yuh—yuh should be addin' to yore herd, and gettin' ready for next Spring."

"I need ready money right now," the girl replied. "Mr. Hatfield tells me the way to get it is by shipping cattle. He says the cattle on this ranch are a lot more valuable than anybody believed. I'm following his advice."

"That blasted range tramp!" Brampton spat angrily. "It looks like he's takin' over, and makin' yuh forget yore real friends. What do yuh know about him, anyhow? He showed up here with yore uncle's dead body, and a queer soundin' story as to how Horace came to be killed. Where did he come from? Nobody knows, except that he rode north across the desert. South of the desert, and not so far, either, is the worst section of the Big Bend country, a hangout of owlhoots and hellions wanted by the authorities."

Patricia's blue eyes flashed dangerously, but when she spoke her voice was quiet.

"I have every faith in Jim Hatfield's judgment," she said.

Brampton gave her a keen glance, his hard mouth tightened, and there was a glitter in the depths of his dead-black eyes. However, his next words were mild, and spoken in persuasive tones.

"It's just that I've got yore best interests at heart, Pat," he said. "Cattle in a section like this are a risky proposition. Remember, the big ranch owners over east haven't much use for us herders. When they see yuh hornin' in on their markets, there's no tellin' what they are liable to do. We've got enough trouble with the sheepmen as it is, without gettin' the cattlemen riled up. If yuh needed money bad, yuh coulda told me and I would have been glad to let yuh have it, with the ranch as security. After all, yore uncle was my friend."

The girl's eyes softened. "Don't think me ungrateful, Sarge," she said. "I'm not, really, but I want to stand on my own feet, and this way I believe I can do it. I'll not forget your offer, if things should turn out bad for me."

Brampton's heavy lids lowered over his eyes. The corners of his mouth twitched slightly in what appeared to be a suppressed smile.

The trail herd grew swiftly. Hatfield had decided to work the south end of the spread first. He chose a site about midway between the ranchhouse and where the wasteland began for his holding spot. Here a little stream that meandered southward to eventually lose itself in the thirsty sands of the desert formed a wide and deep pool with overhanging banks and provided ample water.

The grass was good, which made the task of holding the cattle in close herd easier. Hatfield had in the meanwhile added three more roundup hands to his outfit, so he had ample men for the task.

"I figger from looking the ground over that most of the good beef are on the south range," he told his men. "I've already got in touch with a buyer who'll be glad to take as big a herd as we can get together pronto. We'll round up everything we can in this section first. Then later we'll work the north range and get another herd ready.

"That'll take longer, and it won't be so big as this first one, but it'll be big enough to ship. We'll let the calf brandin' go for now. And don't drive in any culls or cutbacks. We'll look 'em over careful later. Just drive in first-rate beef cuts this time.

"And don't go scarin' the gumption out of the goats up in the hills," he cautioned the waddies—"The little hellions stampede as bad as cows if they get scared, and they cripple easy and can't take care of themselves over-well in water on account of their heavy wool. A whole herd would drown in a pool like this one here in the crik."

"Goats!" grunted a cowboy contemptuously. "They look like sheep to me, smell like 'em, too, and do about the same kind of cussed b-a-a-ain'! Ain't no difference 'tween the critters and sheep, so far as I can make out."

Hatfield chuckled. "Don't yuh go doin' any bendin' over with yore back turned when an old billy is around, or yuh'll find out one dif'rence 'tween them and sheep," he advised.

IT WAS not long before the herd was almost ready for shipment.

"Chances are we'll start 'em rollin' tomorrer," Hatfield predicted one evening. "That is," he added with a glance at the lowering sky, "if that storm that seems to

be buildin' up over in the west doesn't hang on too long. Chuck, you and Wannigan can 'sing' to 'em tonight," he told two of the extra hands. "Ike, you had better stick around, too, and keep an eye on things. If that storm really gets goin' it may be hard to keep 'em from driftin.' Don't reckon yuh have to worry over much about a stampede here in a fenced range, but keep yore eyes open just the same."

The two punchers assigned to ride night guard shrugged their shoulders philosophically, saw to it that their slickers were in good order and made other preparations against their disagreeable chore. Old Ike Emerson hoped his rheumatism wouldn't act up and hunted up a sheltered spot where he could boil coffee during the night, even if it rained pitchforks, with sawlogs for handles.

The storm broke in full fury before midnight, and the three cowboys spent the next two hours practically under water. The cattle were nervous and restless and showed a tendency to drift, but were kept in order without too much difficulty.

Finally the rain ceased and a wan glow of moonlight began seeping through the thinning clouds. Old Ike, sitting his horse atop the high bank that flanked the pool, suddenly thought he saw unexpected movement on the brush grown slope beyond the clearing. He leaned forward to peer through the dark, and that doubtless saved his life.

Even as he opened his mouth to shout to his comrades, lances of reddish flame gushed from the shadowy brush. The crack of rifles flung back and forth metallically along the slopes. The air quivered to a wild yelling.

Ike Emerson heard Wannigan's scream of agony, saw "Chuck" plunge headlong to the ground. Then the world exploded in pain and whirling flame. He was spun from the saddle and over the bank. He struck the surface of the pool with a prodigious splash and vanished under the black water.

The bite of that icy water kept the old waddy from losing consciousness, although his head whirled and rang from the blow dealt him by the slug that had creased his scalp. Down he went, down and down into the depths of the pool.

Ike Emerson was a shrewd old-timer and knew just what to do. Clamping his lips shut to hold what breath remained to him in his lungs, he swam under the surface, going downstream with the current, until his chest was bursting and he was forced to come up for a breath. One frantic gulp and he dived again, and swam until his feet dragged on the bottom.

He broke surface once more and saw the loom of an overhanging bank almost over him. With the greatest care not to make

[Turn page]

a splash, he slithered ahead until he was well beneath the overhang. Here he climbed up the sloping creek bed until he was out of the water. On a narrow strip of dry ground, hidden by the brush grown overhang, he slumped senseless.

The dawn was streaking the sky when Emerson recovered consciousness. He raised his aching head and glared wildly about. With a rush, the events of hours before came back to him. He listened intently but could hear nothing other than the gurgling of the stream.

Cautiously he moved his arms and legs, and discovered no limb that would not function, no joint that would not bend. Half-crawling, half-shuffling, he made his way along under the overhang until it shelfed back and he was able to crawl up the sloping bank.

He peered over the edge and saw that the herd was gone. Not far off lay the bodies of Chuck and Wannigan. Their horses, and his own, were grazing nearby.

LIMPING badly, and so stiff he could hardly move, Ike managed to catch his horse and clamber into the saddle, after first ascertaining that Chuck and Wannigan were beyond human help. He swore bitterly over the murdered punchers, and shook his fist toward the south and the distant desert, whither the trail of the widelooped herd led.

Then he turned his horse and sent him skallyhootin' to the Cross C ranchhouse.

Jim Hatfield and the Cross C cowboys were aroused by old Ike's yells as he rode up to the ranchhouse in the full light of morning. They tumbled out pronto and listened to Ike's story of what had happened.

"The hellions have hours' start," the old cowboy finished. "They'll be half-way across the Tonto toward the Big Bend by now, dang 'em! Mebbe we can catch up with 'em 'fore they make the hills down there, but I don't figger there's much chance. The wind's blowin' and the sand'll be driftin' on the desert, wipin' out all hoof marks. And once they get into the hills down in the bend, the devil hisself couldn't smoke 'em out. What you think, Jim?"

"We'll make a try at it anyhow," Hatfield replied quietly. "Saddle up, fellers. I'm goin' to play a hunch, and if it figgers to be a straight one, we may give them sidewinders the surprise of their lives. Hustle some coffee out while we're gettin' the rigs on, Miller. We won't take time for any more breakfast than that."

Shortly afterward, the Cross C cowboys, with Hatfield at their head, thundered away south.

Across the rangeland, the broad trail left by the fleeing cattle was easy to follow. It was different, however, when they reached the arid inferno of the Tonto. The wind that blew the storm away had increased in force and the dust devils were dancing and swirling over the desert's face. Even the Tonto Trail itself was at times obliterated, but the sand usually blew away from the hard packed surface.

"It's the only way the hellions can take," declared a puncher. "Yuh can't cross the Tonto any other way. If things break for us, we ought to catch up with 'em 'fore they snake into the Big Bend hills. Them beefs are purty fat and will be gettin' tired by now. Sift sands, yuh jughaids, ye got places to go and things to do."

The wind continued to rise and the sand swirled in blinding clouds. The cowboys swathed their neckerchiefs over their mouths and drew their hat-brims low over their burning eyes. Through narrowed lids they stared constantly into the murky south, their bronzed faces grim with anticipation.

Hatfield, however, continually searched the dark loom of the western hills with his glance. Suddenly he turned Goldy's head toward them.

A chorus of protest arose, and volleyed questions, pungently spiced with profanity.

"I'm playin' a long hunch," the Lone Wolf told them with a decision that admitted of no argument. "If it ain't, we won't lose enough time to matter much. We're headin' for that canyon mouth over there, the one with the marbled walls."

Shortly afterward they entered the mouth of the canyon into which the killers of old Horace Wainwright had vanished. Almost immediately Hatfield's intuition was justified. The soft ground at the mouth of the gorge was scored by countless hoofs.

"By gosh, they did head into here!" a cowboy yelped. "I bet we got 'em trapped. If this canyon ain't a box, I never saw one."

Hatfield smiled grimly, and said nothing.

CHAPTER XI

Rustlers' End

EVEN where the stony ground began, the trail was easy to follow. The plunging herd had leveled the brush like a passing hurricane. The wideloopers had undoubtedly anticipated no pursuit, apparently confident that their ruse would be successful.

"We'll corner 'em at the head of this gully!" the punchers chattered enthusiastically. "The hellions figgered we'd go skallyhootin' south and give up when we come to the hills down there. Then after we'd rode back, they'd slip out and jog on their way as happy as a honeybee in a jug of sorghum!"

But still the Lone Wolf said nothing. It was only when, far up the canyon, the trail suddenly veered into the mouth of a narrow gorge which split the canyon wall that he spoke:

"I figger them sidewinders are headin' for the Big Bend country, all right," he said. "But they don't figger on sneakin' back this way. They figger on circling west through the hills and doublin' back south along the far slopes. Unless my hunch ain't ridin' a straight trail, there'll be a pass to the west somewheres up this snake-hole.

"But as you fellers said a while ago, them beefs must be gettin' almighty fagged. I figger before they hit the hills, they'll stop up here somewheres to rest 'em. They won't be worried about anybody tailin' 'em up here and they'll take it easy and, the chances are, be off guard. That's what I'm counting on.

"Go slow from here on, now, and keep yore ears open. Keep a sharp eye out, too. The chances are they won't take the trouble to have a rear guard out, but they might. We don't want to run into an ambush. Take 'em by surprise and we'll get the drop on 'em before they get into action."

His men nodded grimly, and rode with eyes and ears alert.

The height of the canyon walls increased as they rode northward, and drew together until the bottom of the gorge was gloomy with shadows. Far overhead was a narrow band of blue sky fringed by the brush which clothed the rim-rock. It seemed that only the heavier dregs of light sank to the somber depths. No bright sunbeam could fall so far. They died far, far above. The encroaching walls echoed back the passing hoofs in a fantastic jumble of echoes.

"This is the sort of place where ghosts and things ought to hang out," old Stiffy Willis muttered uneasily. "Did yuh ever see such a hole? I feel like a corpse all set for a buryin'."

"Yuh'll be set for one, all right, old-timer, if them hellions get first look at us," a cowboy told him grimly. "Shucks! there ain't even enough light to see to shoot by!"

"Slow down," Hatfield cautioned them. "We're makin' too much racket. I figger we haven't much farther to go. Walk yore broncs, and listen sharp."

A moment later he held up his hand. Thin with distance, echoing weirdly down the rocky gorge, came the disgusted wail of a tired and hungry steer.

"Gettin' hot!" the Ranger growled. "Mebbe around that next bend. Get set, gents!"

There was a simultaneous clutching of weapons. Fierce eyes peered intently toward the shadowy bend of the rock walls. Mouths tightened grimly. The punchers let the reins fall on their horses' necks so as to have both hands free.

"Easy," Hatfield cautioned. "I've a hunch the canyon widens out the other side of that bend. Chances are there's water, and grass, there."

A puncher sniffed sharply. "I smell wood smoke!" he muttered.

"Right," Hatfield agreed. "The sidewinders are takin' time to cook breakfast. I'll bet a peso they ain't expectin' any trouble. Take it slow to the bend, then fog it around there. And come up shootin', gents. That outfit won't be took alive, and they'll be salty. Don't give 'em time to scatter and take cover or we'll be swappin' lead in here till we're gray-headed. All right! Punch the breeze!"

He clamped his knees hard against Goldy's sides as he spoke. The great sorrel shot forward, his hoofs drumming a thunder of sound back from the canyon wall. At flying speed he careened around the bend. Close behind him raced the grim-faced cowboys, guns ready, eyes peering for a sight of the wideloopers.

AS Hatfield had surmised, the canyon widened beyond the bend. The floor was grass-grown, with occasional straggles of trees, especially along the banks of a tiny stream that flowed northward from a spring that bubbled from beneath a wall of rock.

The tired herd was contentedly grazing, or drinking from the stream. Near the spring a fire burned, and around it lounged five men. They leaped to their feet as the Cross C outfit roared around the bend, and clutched their weapons.

But even as they raised their rifles the storm blast of death struck them. Hatfield's long Colts streamed fire and behind him he could hear the constant cracking of his companions' guns.

Two of the wideloopers went down under that first volley. The others fought like cornered rats. A cowboy reeled in his saddle, clutching at a blood-spouting shoulder. Another fired grimly with his left hand, his right arm hanging limp and useless.

A slug turned Hatfield's hat sideward on his head. Another plucked viciously at his sleeve. A third burned a red streak along one bronzed cheek. Then he lowered his smoking guns and gazed at the five prostrate forms sprawled about the fire.

"Anybody hurt bad?" he called over his shoulder.

A swift examination showed that the two wounded men were painfully but not seriously injured. While old Stiffy, who was a bit of a doctor, cared for the injured and made them as comfortable as the circumstances would allow, Hatfield examined the bodies of the dead raiders. They were hard-

bitten individuals of a type familiar to the Border, with little to set them apart from others of their ilk. Neither Miller nor the Cross C punchers had seen any of them before.

"They don't belong to the sheepmen, anyhow," grunted the old herder. "They're—

His voice trailed off in an unintelligible mumble of sound. At the same instant the Cross C riders crowded close, and, their faces bleak, their eyes hard, stared at what Hatfield had already noticed.

Two of the dead owlhoots wore batwing chaps, the hair of the outer surfaces dyed black. And, tangled in the long black hair, were crinkly white tufts that every man in the group recognized as sheep wool!

It was Hatfield who broke the grim silence. "I know what you fellers are thinkin'," he said quietly. "And I don't want yuh to go runnin' yore brands 'fore yuh're shore yore irons are hot. This may be somethin' altogether different from what it looks like. There's lots of ways a jigger might get sheep wool tangled in his chaps. There's nothin' to prove that this wool come out of the Tonto Valley. And not a thing to tie it up with the sheepmen there. I don't want this talked about, either. Tie hard and fast till yuh know what yuh got in yore loop."

He turned the full force of his long green eyes on the assembled punchers. There was some muttering under the breath, glowering looks at the dead rustlers, then a reluctant nodding of heads. Stiffy Willis spoke for the group.

"Yuh ain't so old, son," he said, 'but I figger yuh got more wisdom wrinkles on yore horns than any of us. What you say goes."

Hatfield carefully examined the garments of the dead owlhoots. Their pockets turned out the usual miscellany of the range country, but nothing of particular significance.

"Their hosses are over there by the crik," Stiffy hazarded hopefully. "Mebbe there's somethin' about the rigs what'll tie 'em up with somethin' or other."

A moment later he called: "No brands. Plumb ordinary rigs, the kind most everybody uses. What'll we do with these cayuses?"

"Load these hellions onto 'em and we'll take the whole kit and bilin' to the sheriff," Hatfield replied. "Mebbe he can make some—"

He ceased speaking abruptly and stood staring at the crest of the long western slope that had replaced the perpendicular cliffs of the lower canyon. Up that slope ran a deep and narrow gulley thickly grown with brush.

Out of this gulley, at the crest of the slope, had suddenly appeared a tall man riding a big bay horse whose coat gleamed in the sunlight. He turned as he reached the crest, stared into the gorge for a moment, and then vanished over the rim.

"By Gadfrey, one of the hellions snuk away!" swore old Stiffy. "He must have been over in the mouth of that gulch when the shootin' started, and hightailed it up through the brush."

"And I'll bet a hatful of pesos he's a big skookum he-wolf of the pack!" exclaimed a cowboy. "That kind always has the luck to draw a pat hand."

Stiffy uttered a growl, and glowered at the distant crest, which was a good two miles distant.

"Gents, I've seen somebody with the general build of that hombre," he opined.

"About the same height as Arch Randlet, I'd say," remarked Moreman Miller significantly.

"That'll be enough," Hatfield told them. "Nobody could recognize a jigger at that distance, and there's lots of tall gents in this section. Yore rope's runnin' loose, Miller." He had his foot in Goldy's stirrup as he spoke. "Run the herd back to the spread," he ordered his men. "We'll trail 'em to the loading pens tomorrow, after they rest up."

"Where yuh goin'?" demanded Stiffy as Hatfield settled himself in the saddle.

"I'm goin' to try and run down that jigger that got away," Hatfield replied tersely.

"Lemme go with yuh!" the old puncher bawled. "That hellion is liable to be a handful!"

"You'd be a mile behind when Goldy tops the rise," Hatfield shot back at him. "Yuh do what I told yuh."

With that he was gone, racing the great sorrel into the brush-grown cleft.

There proved to be a distinct trail through the tall brush, winding upward toward the distant rimrock.

"Been traveled plenty, too," the Ranger decided. "I got a hunch this is a regular run-way for some outfit down in the Big Bend—like as not the one that's been raisin' so much ructions over to the west of late. Mebbe I can knock over a couple of rabbits with the same rock before this chore is done. Trail, Goldy!"

The great sorrel sped up the steep trail as if it were level ground. He was breathing easily when at last he topped the rim-rock and plummeted down the steep opposite slope.

The long slope was deserted, but the trail down it was distinct, and easy to follow. Goldy took the downgrade at flying speed, his rider watchful and alert. But at the bottom of the slope the trail forked, running north and south through a comparatively wide valley thickly brush-grown and with steeply sloping sides.

Hatfield pulled up undecided. The soil was flinty and there was nothing to show which direction the quarry might have taken. He could see for a considerable distance north and south through the valley, which appeared utterly devoid of life. The brush, while thick, was nowhere more than waist high and did not afford concealment for a mounted man, nor even for a horse.

Muttering with exasperation, the Ranger swung down from the saddle and narrowly scanned the ground.

"Looks like the hellion woulda headed south to the Bend," he mused, "but there ain't any guarantee that he did. Mebbe he did just the opposite to throw off anybody who come tailin' him, and mebbe he's got business to the north, or a slip-hole of some kind up in that direction. Got to take both angles into consideration."

CHAPTER XII

Shadow of the Flame

AS THE more logical, Hatfield tried the southerly direction first. Narrowly scanning the ground and the flanking brush for a hundred yards or so, he found no sign of a horseman's recent passing. Shaking his head dubiously, he retraced his steps and studied the trail north of the fork.

Suddenly he uttered a sharp exclamation and his gaze centered on a small round boulder that lay in the middle of the track.

There was little to distinguish the stone from the multitude of its fellows scattered about. But Hatfield had noted that the rounded upper surface, in contrast to those of the others, was damp. He bent over the stone and examined it carefully.

"Uh-huh," he muttered with satisfaction, "It's been knocked loose from its bed in the ground plumb recent, otherwise the top side wouldn't be wet and the under side dry, like it is. Rocks don't jump out of the ground by theirselves, but a hoss' iron can kick one loose in passin'. Yes, that skallyhootin' gent headed north, and he was siftin' sand, too."

Hurriedly mounting, he sent Goldy northward at a fast clip. He rode tense and alert, scanning the winding trail ahead, carefully noting any change in the growth which flanked it, doubly cautious when the valley curved as it frequently did. The bridle lay limp on Goldy's neck and Hatfield guided him with knees and voice, leaving both hands free for the Winchester that he held ready for instant action.

That he was on the right trail he was increasingly certain from signs his keen eyes noted from time to time. Once it was a dangling twig, its broken edge still damp with oozing sap. Again it was a clean white scar on the dark surface of a stone, the kind of a scoring made by the scrape of a horse's iron.

Hatfield intensified his vigilance. He felt confident that his horse would warn him of the near presence of any other life in the universal desolation, and he relied on Goldy's intelligence as much as on his own watchfulness. He pushed on as swiftly as he dared in the hope of overtaking the quarry before nightfall rendered the task an impossibility.

All the long afternoon the lonely, deserted valley flowed northward through the grim battlement of the hills, with the scarred and broken ribbon of the trail ever winding ahead.

What feet, Hatfield wondered, had in bygone ages beat this deep indenture in the hard valley floor? A game track in the beginning, no doubt, but its directness and regularity attested that the foot of man was responsible for its later development.

Hatfield visioned dark-skinned men with piercing eyes, loose-limbed, tireless, following relentlessly with ready spear and bow on the spoor of antelope, buffalo and deer. The Southwest, he knew, was full of such trails, mute reminders of vanished races who had lived and had their being in a land long since given over to the wolf, the javelina and the bear.

The stark hills hid their secret well, mysteries unreadable to the conquering white man who came to wonder and explore. Now they provided sanctuary for the lawless, and once more their inscrutable eyes looked upon the scenes of cruelty and violence, even as did the bloody sands of the desert to the south. Suffering and death were their dubious gifts to man.

The flaming sun sank lower in the western sky.

The shadows lengthened and a murky haze gathered over the valley floor. Above, the hill crests burned scarlet and gold and tremulous saffron, but in the depths welled a dusky blue mist that thickened and curdled until it washed the thorny growth with an intangible flood of nebulosity in which objects were illusive and unreal.

Hatfield's brows drew together as his eyes seemed to register movement that he knew did not exist. A somber threat sifted down from the hilltops with the thin blue dusk, and unseen menace gibbered at him from the gloom. The lower edge of the sun was touching the western crags, the sky above was a bowl of multi-colored fire.

Then suddenly, without preliminary warning, a sword of light slanted upward from

the dark loom of the hills ahead. For fleeting moments the great shaft burned through the shadows. Then, before Hatfield could definitely locate its source, it thinned and vanished. A faint afterglow trembled upward for an instant, then it too was gone.

"The same thing I saw from the rim-rock down in the canyon," the Ranger muttered, narrowing his eyes to pierce the thickening gloom. "Now just where in blazes did it come from? Mebbe four or five miles to the north and a mite east of this valley. Shore wish I coulda pinned it down 'fore it snapped off. Just the same, I'm beginnin' to get a notion about it, and it's a plumb interestin' one."

He rode on, his eyes deep with thought.

The slowly rising flood of shadow was washing the upper slopes now. The valley floor was swathed in a dusk that swiftly deepened toward complete darkness. Hatfield had already slowed Goldy to a swift walk, a precaution against the boulders that strewed the trail, and the rain-washed gulleys that scored its surface.

"This is beginnin' to be plumb foolishment," he told the sorrel at length. "We're not only riskin' a drygulching from that hellion ahead, but a busted neck as well. Reckon it's about time to coil our twine, feller. Keep yore eyes peeled for a good spot and we'll light down for a spell."

A little later he heard the tinkle of running water to the left. Turning Goldy's head he sent him cautiously up a gentle slope to a little plateau, grass-grown and dotted with thickets. A tiny spring welled up from a shallow depression, its waters clear and cold. The trail ran close to the west wall of the valley, now, and overhead there was a bulging loom of beetling cliff which promised shelter from wind and possible rain.

For some minutes, after dismounting, Hatfield stood studying the dimly seen ribbon of trail ahead. Finally he shrugged his broad shoulders and proceeded to get the rig off Goldy.

To continue the pursuit through the darkness would be, he realized, rank foolishness. The man ahead, doubtless familiar with the trail, could easily give him the slip in the gloom, and just as easily drygulch him at some favorable spot.

"Uh-huh, looks like he's given us the slip this time, feller," he told the sorrel. "Well, better luck next time, I hope. I'll just turn you loose over the other side of the overflow from the spring and yuh can fill up on grass. Looks like a pretty nice growth over there. I've got some coffee in my saddle-bags, and bread. Glad I left the fryin' pan in, too, even though it does bang yore ribs when yuh're siftin' sand. Saddle-bags are a plumb nuisance, with their flappin', but they come in handy at times like this, just the same."

Shortly he had a fire going and a helping of chuck in course of preparation. After he had filled himself, he relaxed comfortably beside his little fire, rolled a cigarette with the slim fingers of his left hand and smoked with relish, thinking deeply the while.

He had spread his blanket on the grass, with his saddle for a pillow. He lay back, his hands locked under his head and gazed upward at the flicker of firelight on an outcropping of gleaming quartz high up on the cliff. As he gazed, his eyes narrowed slightly. He turned his head and glanced up the silent valley, which suddenly seemed full of unseen menace.

"Wonder just how far that reflection of firelight can be seen?" he mused, turning his glance back once more to the fitful gleam high overhead.

MORE than once during his Ranger career, Jim Hatfield had preserved his life by giving careful attention to something which appeared small and inconsequential. Now as he studied the flickering glow, he arrived at an abrupt decision. Working swiftly, he broke off an armful of branches from nearby bushes and rolled them in Goldy's saddle blanket, which he had spread beneath his own. He propped the long, bulky bundle against his saddle and perched his hat a-top the end. Then he stood back and studied his handiwork as seen by the dim light of the dying fire.

"Uh-huh, looks quite a bit like a gent sleepin' with his hat on, which isn't uncommon for a feller to do on cool nights like this," he mused. He grinned a trifle sheepishly as he gathered up his own blanket and strode away from the fire. "Mebbe I'm just being a nervous Nellie," he admitted to himself. "But just the same I'll sleep better up in the brush a ways, even if it will be a mite cooler than beside the fire."

Under a clump of growth some distance from the fire he spread his blanket. Then he lay down, but not to sleep for a while. Instead, he lay listening, his ear pressed to the ground.

The night was still and any sound, however slight, would carry a long way. The tinkle of the spring sounded unduly loud, and he could distinctly hear the grind of Goldy's teeth as he cropped the grass some distance off.

Suddenly he tensed. Had he imagined it, or had there come to his ears a faint clicking sound far off, but persistent? It ceased abruptly, however, and he began to believe that his imagination was really playing him tricks.

"I'm all keyed up, and hearin' things," he

muttered, relaxing once more.

But just the same he could not banish the feeling that something menacing and deadly was at large in the silent valley. The sixth sense that develops in men who ride down the years with danger as a constant stirrup companion was strong in Jim Hatfield, and he had learned not to disregard the warnings of this silent monitor.

So he lay wide awake, peering, listening, despite the weariness that clamored against this seemingly needless precaution.

"Oh, heck!" he muttered at length. "I'm actin' plumb loco. A little shuteye is in order and I'm goin' to get it."

He relaxed comfortably as he spoke, then abruptly almost leaped off the blanket.

A crashing report had shattered the silence into shards. Hatfield distinctly heard a bullet strike the blanket roll by the fire, which jerked and twitched under the impact. He had seen no flash of a gun, but the shot had apparently come from the dense brush beyond the trail.

After that first involuntary start, Hatfield lay without sound or motion, guns ready, eyes fixed on the flickering circle of firelight.

"Mebbe the hellion will sneak up to the fire to see if he made a finish job of it," he breathed, as he continued to wait and watch.

But the silence remained unbroken. There was no movement amid the shadows beyond the firelight. Then he heard again the rhythmic clicking that had disturbed him before. He identified it now as the hoofbeats of a fast-ridden horse. The sound quickly faded into the distance.

For a moment he contemplated pursuing the fleeing horseman, but abandoned the idea as foolhardy. In the silent night, the quarry would be certain to hear the beat of Goldy's irons, and the advantage would all be on his side.

"Smart!" the Ranger growled, as he sheathed his guns and sat up. "Too smart to gamble on the chance that he might have missed and I was playing 'possum. Threw lead once and hightailed. Uh-huh, smooth and salty. Figgered all the time he was bein' tailed. Waited until it got dark, then holed up somewheres ahead and waited.

"When I didn't show up, he reasoned it out that I'd stopped and made camp. So he rode back until he saw that flicker of firelight on the cliff, then unforked and slid back through the brush till he could draw a bead on what he thought was me by the fire.

"Nice sociable sort of sidewinder! Trailed his rope this time, all right, but next time mebbe it'll be a different story. His sort always slips sooner or later, and he's had more'n his share of breaks so far."

HATFIELD rode north the following morning until the trail turned sharply to the west and slithered up the slope to vanish over the rim-rock.

"That's where she circles back toward the Bend, the chances are," he mused as he pulled Goldy to a halt. "But I'm bettin' my gent didn't ride that way."

He hesitated a moment, then turned the sorrel's head east. He rode across the valley and tackled the steep eastern slope. The ride through the hills was long and dangerous, but his uncanny plainsman's sense of distance and direction had not played him false.

Late afternoon found him riding down a slope that led to the Cross C range. Dusk was falling when he reached the ranchhouse.

CHAPTER XIII

Range War in the Making

CROSS C cowboys ran their herd to the Huajilla loading pens the following morning, where a long line of stock cars were waiting to receive them.

Leaving his men to attend to the loading under the supervision of old Stiffy, Hatfield rode to the sheriff's office, leading the horses that bore the bodies of the slain rustlers.

Sheriff Hill swore explosively when he saw what awaited at the door of his office.

"Yuh seem to have a plumb scald on packin' in dead bodies," he said and glowered at Hatfield. "All right, bring 'em in and lay 'em on the floor, and let me hear how yuh come to collect 'em. I got word of it yesterday from that dadblamed old Stiffy Willis, but I'd like to hear yore way of tellin' the yarn."

The sheriff listened to Hatfield's story with numerous snorts and grunts.

"Things was plumb peaceful till you coiled yore twine in this section," he complained when Hatfield had finished. "All tarnation's been bustin' loose ever since yuh landed here."

"Mebbe it'll be peaceful again after I'm gone," the Lone Wolf replied grimly, with a significance that was lost on the sheriff.

"Yeah, I've a notion it will," he snorted in reply, adding hopefully, "Yuh ain't gettin' itchy feet about now by any chance?"

Hatfield grinned, with an upward quirking of the corners of his mouth and a white flash of teeth.

"Not yet," he disclaimed. "I'll let yuh know when I do. Reckon yuh'll wanta be around to wish me good-by and good luck."

Sheriff Hill swore a crackling volley of weird oaths as he glared after the Lone Wolf's tall form passing through the doorway.

Sitting his golden horse, Hatfield watched the train of loaded stock cars rumble away northward. "Well, we had luck with that bunch, after all," he remarked to his men.

"You may call it luck, but I call it almighty smart figgerin'," grunted old Stiffy Willis.

The admiring glances cast in Hatfield's direction by the Cross C punchers showed that they shared Stiffy's opinion.

Later that evening, Hatfield contacted Tom Elliot in his favorite bar, which was largely frequented by cattlemen from the east ranges. Elliot wore a jubilant but slightly worried look. "I'm celebratin'!" he told the Ranger. "Just turned twenty-one today! Come and have a drink!"

"Fine!" Hatfield congratulated. "Here's hopin' yuh see heaps more birthdays."

"It's not only that I've just come of age," Elliot went on in an eager voice. "From now on I'm my own man. I don't have to listen to Arch Randlet any more. He hasn't any strings on me now."

"How's that?" asked Hatfield, interested.

"It's like this," Elliot explained. "When Mother died, she left me a bit of money, but her will provided that Cousin Arch should be my guardian until I come of age, and that he should have the handling of my money. I couldn't spend any without his say-so. I had one devil of a time persuadin' him to let me buy the Walkin' R. He wanted me to put my money in the sheep business with him.

"But I didn't have any use for sheep and held out for a cattle spread. We had a couple of bad rows over it, but he finally gave in to the extent of lettin' me buy the ranch. But he never would let me have enough money to stock or run it properly. I've been pinchin' and barely keepin' my head above water.

"I had to go to him for everything. We never did get along, even when I was a button back home in the Panhandle and he would come to visit us. But he was about the only relation we had left and Mother seemed to figger he'd look after me when she was gone.

"We fell out for keeps a month back—over the Cross C—and I've been to his place just once since then. If I hadn't been so close to twenty-one, I've a notion he'd have made me plenty of trouble, but I reckon he figgered the time was too short. Now to thunder with him! I'm my own boss. I never did like this way of doin' business anyhow.

"Anything to make a dollar is Arch's way of lookin' at things. Mebbe he's always managed to stay inside the law, but I've a notion the law can be bent a mite by folks who are well fixed and ain't too particular. He's got a lot of sheepmen beholden to him. He loaned 'em money, and charged plenty of interest when they were up against it.

"Reckon he holds mortgages on half the ranches in the valley. They have to go along with him, even though they don't always hanker to. He's a cold proposition, is cousin Arch. I'm shore glad to be out from under his thumb. Have another drink!"

AFTER the drinks were brought, Elliot went on:

"But there's somethin' else I wanted to talk to you about, Hatfield. I'm scared this section is in for big trouble. There's a rumor goin' around that the Carroll land suit is goin' against the sheepmen. Nobody seems to know for shore how it started, but everybody is whisperin' it. The cattlemen are beginnin' to paw dirt. They figger it'll mean sheep on the open range shore as shootin'.

"And that'll mean honest-to-goodness shootin' sooner or later, or I'm a heap mistook," he went on gloomily. "And the sheepmen are shore riled against the goat herders. They blame them for all their troubles. I figgered yuh ought to know."

"Plumb glad yuh told me," Hatfield agreed. "But don't let it bother yuh too much, Elliot. I got a hunch things will work out all right 'fore all's finished."

"I shore hope so," replied Elliot. "I don't want to see no trouble, specially for the goat herders. They ain't done nothin' wrong, and I don't see why they should be left holdin' the sack."

"They won't be," Hatfield assured him briefly. He did not amplify the declaration, but something in his manner seemed to relieve Elliot's mind greatly.

"Reckon when you say a thing, a feller can bank on it," he conceded, casting the Lone Wolf an admiring glance. "Yuh got a way about yuh, Hatfield, that makes folks believe in yuh. I—I'm awful glad yuh take time to talk to me."

Hatfield smiled down at the boy.

"That's about as nice a thing as I've had said to me for quite a spell," he replied in his deep voice. "And I'll always have time to talk with yuh, Tom, and I'll be plumb pleased to."

After leaving Elliot, Hatfield repaired to the railroad telegraph office, where he sent two long messages. One was addressed to Captain Bill McDowell, Ranger Headquarters, Franklin. The other went to a noted law firm at the state capital.

The operator, sworn to secrecy by the rules of his company, regarded the tall Ranger with respect and lively interest after he had dispatched the telegrams.

Hatfield got his replies late the following evening. The one from Captain Bill caused his eyes to glow exultantly, read:

DESCRIPTION YOU SENT ME FITS A MAN WANTED BY THE MEXICAN AUTHORITIES FOR A KILLING DOWN IN MEXICO ABOUT TWO YEARS BACK. FELLOW KILLED A PROFESSOR OF ARCHAEOLOGY HE WAS GUIDING TO SOME AZTEC RUINS. APPARENT MOTIVE, ROBBERY. WAS TRACKED TO BIG BEND COUNTRY, TEXAS. TRAIL LOST THERE. THOUGHT TO BE SOMEWHERE IN TEXAS.

Hatfield studied the message for some time, then carefully stowed it away in his pocket. But after reading the precise reply from the law firm, he left the telegraph office in thoughtful mood.

He rode immediately to the Cross C ranchhouse, where he found Patricia Wainwright reading in the living room. He sat down, rolled a cigarette, and regarded her contemplatively. Pat seemed to rather enjoy his regard than otherwise. She glanced up demurely through the dusky fringe of her lashes, the hint of a smile on her red lips.

"What's on your mind, Jim?" she asked. "You look as serious as the best man at a wedding."

"The best man isn't the one that needs to be lookin' serious," the Ranger chuckled in reply. "Pat," he went on in graver tones, "yuh don't hanker to get into the sheep raisin' business, do yuh?"

THE girl gave him a surprised look.

"Of course I don't," she replied. "I don't know anything about sheep, and I don't care anything about them. I intend to raise goats, and cattle, if you still think it is advisable."

"I do," Hatfield replied briefly. "But what I'm gettin' at is this: I've got it pretty straight that yuh're goin' to win the Carrol land suit. Which means that the whole Tonto Valley will be adjudged yore property. Now I reckon yuh know by this time that the valley isn't good goat land. Goats would starve over there on those low flats.

"Goats don't graze like cattle or sheep, as mebbe yuh've found out by now. Goats browse. They've got to have plenty of brush land if they're goin' to do any good. The hills of yore west range are covered with the kind of browse goats go for, and it's no good for anything else, not even sheep."

"That's what Moreman Miller told me," the girl admitted. "Which is what made it so ridiculous for the sheepmen to think the herders wanted their land. I can't understand their viewpoint."

"Folks out here know nothin' about Angora goats and their eatin' habits," Hatfield replied. "If the sheepmen hadn't been so uppity in the beginnin' and had given the herders a chance to explain, they mighta saved themselves a heap of trouble. But right in the beginning they decided they wasn't goin' to even speak to a herder, and they plumb discouraged any advances on the part of the herders. I doubt if they woulda believed anything a herder told 'em, anyhow."

"Arch Randlet is to blame for that," the girl declared, a touch of bitterness in her voice. "Why, when Sarge Brampton went over to his place to try and talk to him, Randlet ordered Sarge off at the point of a gun, and swore he'd shoot him on sight if he ever set foot on his land again."

Hatfield's lips quirked slightly on receipt of this interesting piece of information.

"Which brings me back to what I was aimin' to say in the beginning," he remarked. "If the judges' decision is what I figger it will be, yuh're goin' to come into a mighty valuable property. Yuh can do one of two things.

"Yuh can dispossess the sheep raisers, take their land from them and force 'em to run their flocks onto open range. And that will mean a nice little sheep and cattle war in the making. Or yuh can get together with the sheepmen, sell 'em the land at a fair price on easy terms and keep things peaceful in the section. I doubt if they can pay yuh what the land is really worth, but mebbe yuh'll come out ahead in the long run."

The girl regarded him thoughtfully. "What do you advise, Jim?" she asked.

Hatfield replied without hesitation. "I'd advise that yuh get together with the sheepmen and have an understandin'. I consider it's the square thing as well as the sensible thing to do."

Patricia nodded her bright head. "I think so, too," she said with decision. "But there's one thing I'd like to ask you about," she added. "Do you think all the sheepmen are in a position to pay for their land?"

Hatfield hesitated. "I can't say for shore," he admitted at length. "Fellers like Arch Randlet, and others of the old-timers should be able to, I'd say, but I'm not so shore about some of the newcomers. Their flocks are small, and they don't look too prosperous to me. I've a notion they wouldn't have risked coming out here if they had thought they'd have to pay for their land."

"All right," the girl said. "Those able to pay will pay what you consider a just price. Those who are not in a position to pay, or on whom it would work a hardship, can have their land free." She added disgustedly, "I'd like to run Arch Randlet out, if my conscience would let me take advantage of him that way, but I suppose I couldn't bring myself to do such a thing, even to Randlet."

"Pat, yuh shore belong in Texas, all right,"

Hatfield said warmly. "Yuh plumb fit into a country like this. No wonder young Tom Elliot has gone plumb over the steep end of the range!"

She colored under his praise, her lashes lowered for a moment, then her blue eyes met his squarely.

"I'm sure glad you think so, Jim," she said.

There was silence for some moments after that, then Hatfield suddenly asked a question:

"Pat, what become of that old hat yore uncle was wearin' when he was killed—the one—I took the sweat-band out of?"

"I put it up in the garret," the girl replied. "I couldn't bear to see it hanging here on the wall. Why?"

"I'd like to take a look at it," Hatfield explained.

"We'll go upstairs and get it," Pat decided. "You bring a lamp."

CHAPTER XIV

Muttering Rumors

UPON reaching the garret, Hatfield took the battered old hat from the peg on which it hung and examined it carefully. His glance roamed about until it centered on an almost new "J.B." hanging nearby. He examined the new hat in turn, and nodded with satisfaction.

"This one was yore uncle's, too, wasn't it?" he asked the girl.

"Yes," she replied, "but he seldom wore it. He clung to that disreputable old thing. It was seldom off his head."

"And it wasn't his hat, either," Hatfield remarked.

"How do you know that, Jim?"

"This new hat is Size Seven," the Ranger explained. "The old one is at least a seven-and-a-half. Men don't buy new hats a half-size smaller than their old ones. This ties up with the handwriting on the sweat band. Yuh'll remember we agreed yore uncle never wrote it.

"Well, this old hat evidently belonged to Jerry Carrol, and Jerry Carrol put the writin' on the sweat-band. The chances are he explained it to yore uncle, and showed him the key to its meanin'. Naturally yore uncle hung onto this old rainshed and took good care of it. I reckon nobody knew about the writin' in it except yore uncle, though he must have let somethin' slip to somebody about havin' the cipher in his possession, and that got him killed."

The girl nodded moodily. "It all seems so senseless," she remarked. "I can't make head or tail of the whole mess, and I doubt if anybody else ever will."

"Mebbe they will," was Hatfield's noncommittal reply.

The garret was crammed with a curious miscellany of objects. The horrific replica of an Aztec god leered from a corner. There were odds and ends of crude Indian pottery. Also woven mats of Indian manufacture, and stone tipped spears, and stone arrow heads on a shelf.

It appeared that Jerry Carrol had been a collector of sorts.

Pat indicated a decrepit rawhide trunk standing against the wall.

"That trunk is full of funny old books and things," she said.

Hatfield lifted the lid and disclosed a number of oddly bound volumes and crinkly manuscripts written in archaic Spanish. He turned the pages with interest.

"Can you read it, Jim?" the girl asked.

"Might be able to if I studied it awhile," the Lone Wolf replied. "I can read Spanish pretty well, but this is a heap different from the Spanish that is spoken now-days."

He continued to draw forth books and manuscripts from the trunk. He was nearing the bottom when he uttered a sharp exclamation. He was holding in his hands a mass of faded fibre cords in which were tied queer looking knots at irregular intervals.

"What is it?" Pat asked.

"The first I ever saw outside of a museum," Hatfield replied, fingering the ancient cords and regarding them with lively interest. "This is Aztec cord writing. The Aztec Indians, like the Incas of Peru, used a system of writing based on knotted cords. The shape and position of each knot has a meaning. It was their alphabet, their method of recording history and important documents. These strings tell a story of some kind."

"Can you read them?"

Hatfield shook his head. "It's doubtful if there's a white man alive who can read the knotted cords," he replied. "Perhaps some old Indian priests down in the mountains of Mexico can, but if they can, they won't admit it. The cord writing was a secret known only to the priests and the nobility of the Aztecs, and it was a closely guarded secret. I wonder where Carrol happened onto these?" He added musingly, a moment later: "And I wonder could he by any chance read 'em? Seems he was a queer old coot. Mebbe he had discovered the key somehow."

FOR long moments he stood brooding over the knotted cords, his green eyes dark with thought, apparently forgetting the girl who stood beside him. Then he shrugged his shoulders and dropped the ancient strands back in the trunk, placing the old

books on top of them in their original position. He turned and stared at the glowering god in the corner, and the obsidian eyes of the idol seemed to gleam with a mocking light.

"That feller over there is Tezcatlipoca, the god of the underworld, or I'm a heap mistook," he told Pat. "They say he's bad luck to anybody who owns him. He was supposed to live underground and be on the prod all the time against Quetzalcoatl, the god of the sunshine and the air. Quetzal was a good god, and Tezcatlipoca was a bad one. Funny, though, he was the god of the workers in gold and silver and precious stones, and supposed to watch over hidden treasure. Pleasant-looking old coot, isn't he?"

The girl shuddered. "Let's go back downstairs," she urged. "That thing seems to be breathing curses at us, and when the light flickers, I could swear the eyes move. It's uncanny!"

Hatfield chuckled and led the way downstairs.

Sarge Brampton visited the ranchhouse the following day.

"Pat," he said, "the story's goin' around that yuh're right shore to win the Carrol land suit. That means the whole Tonto Valley will be yores to do as yuh like with. Yuh can get rid of them blasted sheepmen for good and all. Drive 'em out, and let 'em fight with the cattlemen over east for range."

"It's your advice to drive them out?" the girl asked curiously.

"It shore is," Brampton replied with emphasis. "We don't want 'em here and that land's valuable."

"But wouldn't that work a hardship on those people?" Pat inquired. "Some of them have been here a long time and look upon that land as their homes."

"Don't pay that no mind," Brampton countered harshly, with a shrug of his heavy shoulders. "You got yoreself and yore friends to look out for. What happens to them and the cattlemen is no concern of yores. And didn't they do in yore uncle Horace? Don't forget that."

"I'm not liable to forget what happened to poor Uncle Horace," the girl replied cryptically. "I'll think over what you said, Sarge. After all, I haven't won the suit yet. It may be just talk."

"I usually know what I'm talkin' about when I say somethin'," Brampton declared.

Pat watched him ride away, sitting his fine bay horse with the grace of a man born to the saddle. There was a thoughtful expression in her blue eyes as she went back to the living room to wait for Jim Hatfield, who had ridden to town earlier in the afternoon.

Hatfield found Huajilla seething.

"There's plumb Hades in the makin'," an old cowboy told him. "The story's hummin' that the sheepmen stand to lose their holt on the Tonto Valley and will be runnin' their flocks onto the open range. Arch Randlet and a bunch of sheepmen are over to the First Chance makin' war talk, and the cowmen are oilin' their guns. There's goin' to be shootin', feller, I'm tellin' yuh, and almighty soon."

HATFIELD headed directly for the First Chance. Immediately on entering the saloon he saw Arch Randlet in the center of a crowd of sheepmen whose faces were hardset and belligerent.

Randlet was gesturing angrily and shouting at the top of his voice.

"I tell yuh we stand to lose our lands if we don't do somethin' almight quick!" he was bellowing. "It's them cussed goat herders are at the bottom of all our trouble. The thing for us to do is move first and run every last one of the hellions out of this section. We can do it, if we stick together. The cowmen will stand by and not make a move. They don't stand to lose anything by it, and they know it. The quicker we move the better.

"Once they're out, no matter how that tarnation land suit goes we're all right. Finish off their cussed goats and send them

[Turn page]

Can't Keep Grandma In Her Chair

She's as Lively as a Youngster—Now her Backache is better

Many sufferers relieve nagging backache quickly, once they discover that the real cause of their trouble may be tired kidneys.

The kidneys are Nature's chief way of taking the excess acids and waste out of the blood. They help most people pass about 3 pints a day.

When disorder of kidney function permits poisonous matter to remain in your blood, it may cause nagging backache, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, getting up nights, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, used successfully by millions for over 40 years. They give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from your blood. Get Doan's Pills.

(Adv.)

skallyhootin' and we won't have to worry. Thunderation with what they say over to the capital! If we get 'em out first, there won't be anything done about it.

"Yuh figger they'll send Rangers in here? Not if the herders have left first. The trouble will all be over then, and the Rangers won't have anything to do. But we got to move fast. As soon as the word comes from the capital that she's won the suit, that red-head gal, old Wainwright's niece, is figgerin' on orderin' us out. She told somebody as much already."

Jim Hatfield pushed through the crowd, shoving men aside as if they were children. He paused, facing Randlet, his slim, terrible hands hooked over his double cartridge belts, the black butts of his heavy guns swung to the front.

"Randlet," he said quietly, "you're a liar!"

SILENCE blanketed the room as the Ranger's voice cut through the turmoil. Arch Randlet's jaw sagged, his arrogant eyes widened.

Then he flushed a fiery red, the muscles of his right arm bulged, his hand tensed.

"Randlet, don't reach!" Hatfield warned him, his voice soft and drawling, but edged with steel. "If yuh do, yuh're paid for! I'm telling yuh to yore teeth again, yuh're a liar when yuh say Patricia Wainwright told anybody she's goin' to run the sheepmen off their land!"

For a moment Randlet stared into the Lone Wolf's blazing green eyes. Then the force of that steady gaze swerved his own glance aside. His face went white, his hand dropped.

Hatfield spoke again.

"And now get out of here, 'fore I throw yuh out," he ordered harshly.

Randlet hesitated, shuffled his feet. Hatfield glided forward a step, his hands swinging easily at his sides, and Randlet hesitated no longer. He turned, slunk toward the door. Over his shoulder he cast a single hate-filled glance, then vanished into the dark.

A long sigh went up as men released the breath they had unconsciously been holding. Hatfield turned to meet their angry stares.

"Gents," he said, "what yuh heard a minute ago was nothin' but bull bellerin'. It was big medicine talk, and nothin' else. I'm here to tell yuh that none of yuh are goin' to lose yore lands, no matter which way the suit goes. All yuh got to do is sit tight and play 'em close to yore vests. Things will be settled fair for everybody, so long as yuh don't go off half-cocked and tangle yore twine."

With a friendly nod to the tense gathering, he turned and left the saloon.

CHAPTER XV

More Sheepmen

ON THE instant, as soon as the swinging doors had closed on Jim Hatfield's tall form, fierce wrangles broke out. Some of the sheepmen were inclined to believe what he told them, others were uncertain and wondered if it wouldn't be better to side with Randlet and take his advice.

"Yuh can't blame Randlet for 'backin' down from that seven-foot hellion," one declared. "Randlet ain't scared, but that feller is a quick-draw man if I ever seen one. Randlet wouldn't had no more chance with him than a pint of whisky in a five-handed poker game, and he knew it. Yuh don't spit in a rattlesnake's eye and give him first bite, if yuh ain't plumb loco."

"But that big feller spoke like he knew what he was talkin' about," another demurred. "I figger we'd best take it easy till we see which way the cat's goin' to hop. I don't reckon we'll lose anythin' by waitin' a mite. Time enough to get our bristles up when we see we're bein' dealt from a cold deck."

There was a general nodding of heads in agreement with this advice. And so the matter was allowed to rest for the moment.

Things quieted down for several days, and then old Stiffy Willis jerked his foaming horse to a slithering halt in front of the Cross C ranchhouse and burst in with truly disquieting news.

"There's sheep comin' through the north pass!" he told Jim Hatfield, gulping his words in his excitement.

"Yuh mean goin' through the pass out of the valley?" Hatfield corrected.

"Nope, I don't," Stiffy declared. "I said comin' through, and that's just what I meant. Big flocks, and lots of herders, salty lookin' hombres, too. They're bedded down jest this side of the pass, and I figger they aim to turn east in the mornin' and drive for the open range, over there."

"They're not Tonto Valley sheep?" Hatfield asked.

"Nope. Never seen any of them fellers before. I didn't get a close look, 'cause as I rode up, a couple of jiggers stepped out with long guns all cocked and ready for business and told me to get out. I got."

"Where are you going, Jim?" Patricia asked as the Ranger turned to the door.

"Just goin' to take a little ride," he replied evasively. "Mebbe I'll be late for supper, so don't wait for me."

Before she could reply he was gone, head-

ing swiftly for the stable, where Goldy contentedly munched oats in his comfortable stall.

Glancing at the sun, Hatfield saw he had ample time to cover the twenty miles to the pass before dusk. He sent Goldy along the trail at a leisurely pace, thinking deeply the while.

It lacked an hour of dark when he rounded a final bend and saw the sunlight glinting on the heavy fleece of the great flock of sheep assembled a little to the right of the railroad tracks. Smoke was rising from cooking fires and he could hear the staccato barking of dogs as he drew near.

He was perhaps a hundred paces from the camp when a gaunt, lanky man stepped forward, rifle in hand.

"That'll be about far enough, cowboy," he called menacingly.

Hatfield slowed Goldy to a walk but did not draw rein until he was within a dozen yards of the glowering herder. He could see other armed men hurrying forward from the camp, fully a score of them.

"Didn't I say yuh were close enough?" bawled the herder, lifting his rifle.

Hatfield hooked one long leg comfortably over the saddle horn, rolled a cigarette and lighted it. Through the thin veil of blue smoke he regarded the herder silently.

The man seemed slightly taken aback by that steady, fearless gaze. He fumbled his rifle, glowered fiercely, cleared his throat.

"Cowmen ain't wanted here," he rumbled at length, as his companions crowded close behind him.

Hatfield puffed his cigarette, blew out a lungful of smoke, and spoke.

"I'm not goin' to bite yuh," he said, a hint of derision in his deep tones, "and I can't figger why yuh're so jumpy with odds twenty to one in yore favor."

THE herder flushed, and lowered his rifle a little sheepishly. "Us fellers ain't lookin' for no trouble," he mumbled defensively, at length.

"Mebbe not," Hatfield replied, "but if yuh come down off yore perch and have a straight talk with me, yuh may save yoreself a hefty carryin' of it that's liable to come along without any lookin'."

The herder bristled. "Just what yuh mean by that?" he demanded truculently.

Hatfield ignored the question, and asked one of his own.

"Just where are you gents headin' for?"

"We ain't discussin' our business with everybody who happens along," the herder parried, "but if yuh're hankerin' to know, we're drivin' our flocks east. We was told when we were invited down into this section that over there is open range."

Hatfield's eyes narrowed a trifle. "And did the folks who invited yuh here tell yuh it is range that's been held by cattlemen for years?" he asked.

The herder shifted his glance. "That ain't neither here nor there," he replied. "The range up north is wore out and we got to go somewheres. We got as much right to live as cowmen. They ain't got no right to hog all the land."

"Mebbe not," Hatfield admitted, "but I reckon they sort of figger they were here first, which counts for somethin'."

"It don't count with us," was the instant rejoinder. "If they wanted to hold the land, why didn't they buy it and fence it. Us fellers don't trespass on owned property, but we aim to know our rights."

His companions nodded their heads vigorously.

Hatfield suddenly swung to the ground with a lithe movement so swift the eye could hardly follow it. Heedless of the glowering looks and menacing weapons, he walked forward until he was directly facing the tense herders, and almost within arm's length of the lanky spokesman.

"Gents," he said, "I'm here to do some plain talking, and I'm not bein' hostile about it, either. I don't run cattle in this section, and I don't work for a cow outfit. I've got nothin' against sheepmen, and I understand they've got to live same as anybody else.

"But I don't want to see a lot of needless trouble hereabouts because of lack of a little ordinary hoss sense. If you fellers go bullin' yore way onto the range over east, there's goin' to be trouble. I got a mighty strong hunch that when yuh was told to come down here, yuh weren't told yuh'd be buckin' an established cattle range. Right?"

The uncomfortable glances the herders cast from one to another answered his question plainer than words.

"We got to go somewheres," an elderly man with bowed shoulders complained. He glanced toward the south. "Looks like almighty fine sheep land down there," he remarked, adding regretfully, "but it's fenced. All us fellers want is a place to settle and live in peace. We been druv from one place to another till we're plumb worn."

He had tired brown eyes and a lined, weary face, and his wrinkled old hands were gnarled and calloused from a lifetime of toil.

Jim Hatfield suddenly smiled, and his stern face became strangely warm and pleasant.

"I understand how yuh feel," he said gently. "Now listen, you fellers, while I tell yuh what I want you to do. Hold yore flocks right here where they are for a couple of days. By that time, I'll figger somethin' will work out for yuh. Yuh've got nothin'

to lose by doin' it, and mebbe a heap to gain. I'll guarantee there won't be no trouble for yuh so long as yuh stay where yuh are. Is it a bargain?"

THE herders hesitated, glancing at each other questioningly, then the old man spoke.

"Son," he said, his cracked voice quavering slightly, "yuh got the look of a man whose word can be depended on. I don't know what cards yuh hold in yore hand, or how yuh aim to play them, but I'm willin' to take a chance on yuh. How about it, boys?"

The other herders nodded, some reluctantly, their eyes still suspicious, but with general agreement.

"All right," the Lone Wolf told them. "I figger yuh can count on somethin' workin' out in the next couple of days. Adios, gents. Be seein' yuh soon."

He strode back to his great golden horse, swung to the saddle and turned the sorrel's head down valley once more. The herders watched him ride away in silence.

"Just how did that jigger talk us into doin' somethin' we had no notion of doin' a-tall?" one complained querulously as Hatfield's tall form vanished around the bend.

"I've a notion," the old man remarked reflectively, "that that feller is in the habit of talkin' folks into doin' things they didn't intend doin'. He strikes me as a nice easy feller to get along with, but the sort if yuh don't get along with, yuh mighty quick wish yuh had. Me, I'm feelin' good for the first time since we headed south."

"I thought when he rode up, that it was the feller who come up north and told us there was plenty of good range for the takin' down here," the lanky spokesman remarked. "They're just about the same height and build, but look different when yuh get close to 'em."

"Uh-huh," the old man grunted, "and I'm out to allow that the difference between 'em is about the same as the difference between four aces and a busted flush!"

Hatfield rode southward through the deepening dusk. From time to time he glanced with an appreciative eye across the wide reaches of fat grassland east of the railroad tracks, which stretched lonely and deserted to the distant skyline. And as he gazed, he smiled to himself and nodded his black head.

"I believe it's goin' to work out, oldtimer," he told his horse. "Now if that word from the capital just comes through pronto!"

The afternoon of the second day following, Hatfield saddled up and headed for town. He was less than a mile from his goal when he observed a horseman round the bend just south of the town.

"Gosh, but that feller is siftin' sand!" he remarked to Goldy as the horseman scudded down the long straight stretch of trail as if blown by the wind.

He studied the approaching rider with narrowed eyes. Suddenly he uttered a sharp exclamation.

"It's Tom Elliott!" he muttered. "Now who put a burr under that jigger's tail?"

A moment later he heard Elliot give an exultant shout. He skittered to a halt beside the Ranger, his eyes wide, his breath coming in short jerks.

"Hatfield!" he yelled. "I was comin' after you! Yuh're the only man I know who can do somethin'!"

"Easy, son, easy!" the Lone Wolf counseled. "What's got yuh makin' far-apart tracks like the devil was after yuh? Tie yore hat on and come down outa the air!"

"The cattlemen!" gulped Elliot. "They done herded up and are headin' for the pass to run them sheepmen out of the section. There's due to be killin's if somethin' ain't done to stop them. They'd ought to be nearly there by now."

"What's the sheriff doin' about it?" Hatfield asked quietly.

"He ain't around," Elliott replied. "Word come this mornin' from the Brewster spread, way down to the southeast, that there was trouble down there, I don't know just what, and Hill hightailed down there with a couple of deputies. I got a notion it was just a run-around to get him out of the way."

"Like as not," Hatfield agreed.

He gathered up his reins. His green eyes were cold as wind-swept winter ice, his face bleak as chiseled granite.

"Be seein' yuh, Tom," he said. "Trail, Goldy!"

The great sorrel shot forward, his irons drumming the hard trail. Elliot jerked his horse around and started to follow, but the sorrel pulled away from him as if he were spiked to the ground.

"That ain't a hoss!" he growled disgustedly, staring after Goldy's vanishing form. "That's somethin' some hellion got from crossin' a cyclone with a lightnin' flash!"

CHAPTER XVI

The Lone Ranger

QUIET and deserted Huajilla seemed, as Hatfield flashed past on his way north. Faces stared at him from doorways and windows, and there were a few knots of silent sheepmen on corners. He felt a tense air of anticipation, the feeling that charges the atmosphere just before a storm breaks.

He settled himself in the saddle, tightened his grip on the reins, and urged the sorrel to greater effort, with voice and hand. He strained his eyes ahead for the telltale cloud of dust that would mark the progress of the cattlemen toward the pass.

But the white ribbon of trail wound on silent and deserted, the air was clear above it. As he neared the pass he listened intently for the ominous crackle of gunfire that would herald the clash of the opposing factions.

The sheepmen had drawn their wagons into line to form a rude barricade just east of the railroad tracks. Between the spokes of the locked wheels, rifle barrels glinted. A hundred yards in front of the improvised barrier, the assembled cattlemen, nearly two score of them, sat their horses, guns in hand, eyes glinting in the shadow of their low-drawn hat-brims.

A few yards out from the barricades stood the lanky spokesman of the herders, his cocked rifle at the ready. A hard-faced old rancher, his horse reined to the front of his followers, regarded the herder threateningly.

"We've givin' you fellers one hour to trail back the way yuh come," he was saying. "When that hour's up, we're comin' in shootin'."

"We ain't goin'," the herder returned doggedly. "We're not on yore land. This is railroad land, and the railroad ain't give us orders to move. We don't hanker for trouble, but if you fellers start it, we'll be here at the finish."

There was a clutching of weapons in the ranks of the cowmen at this reply.

"One hour," the rancher repeated his ultimatum. "If by then them wagons ain't rollin' and them woollies trailin' through the pass, headed north, it's showdown. We—"

He broke off suddenly as a great golden horse thundered around the bend a few hundred yards to the south. He turned to stare at the approaching horseman.

"It's that new foreman from over to the Cross C," somebody called. "What in thunder does he want here?"

Jim Hatfield swerved his sweat-streaked horse and rode directly between the opposing factions, heedless of the rising rumble of remarks and the threatening gun muzzles. His face was bleak, his mouth hard-set, his eyes coldly gray under his black brows.

The butts of his heavy guns swung out from his sinewy hips. And on his broad breast gleamed a silver star set on a silver circle—the feared, honored and respected badge of the Texas Rangers.

His voice rang out like a trumpet blast of sound, fearless, decisive, charged with authority:

"In the name of the State of Texas! Put up them guns, disperse, and go about yore business in an orderly manner."

There was a moment of stunned silence, then a chorus of exclamations.

"Good gosh!" whooped a cowboy. "That feller's a Ranger!"

The cattleman stared. The sheepmen forgot their danger and rose from behind their barricade. The old rancher's voice cut through the turmoil.

"You ain't got no call to horn in here, Ranger," he bellowed. "Us fellers know our rights. We don't intend to have them cussed herders move in and ruin our range."

"Nobody's goin' to move onto yore range," Hatfield replied, "and nobody's goin' to run these fellers off. You fellers are aimin' to take the law in yore own hands, and yuh'll take the consequences if yuh do. I don't intend to have any range war bust loose if I can prevent it, and I figger I can. There's been enough of this foolishness. Get goin'!"

THE cattlemen hesitated. They hated to knuckle under, even to a Ranger, but they knew too well the result of resistance against the forces that silver star stood for. Bullets, swift and sure, to the hearts and brains of some. Vengeance, sure and certain, for all when the "Gentlemen in the White Hats" would ride with flaming rifles through the Tonto Valley to collect the terrible toll demanded for a Ranger slain.

They muttered, fumbled with their hands, but surreptitiously slid their guns back into their sheaths. Reluctantly they gathered up their reins and turned their horses' heads. With many a glowering backward glance, they headed south along the trail. Jim Hatfield followed, walking Goldy slowly.

"I'll be back with you fellers, soon," he flung over his shoulder to the silent herders.

As he vanished around the bend, the old sheepmen who had spoken the day before heaved a deep sigh of relief.

"Gents," he remarktd, "I'm from Montana, a long ways up north, but even up there we've heard tell of them Ranger fellers. That gent that just left is just what I always figgered a Texas Ranger would look and act like!"

* * * * *

In a dingy saloon in Huajilla, Arch Randlet, Sarge Brampton and two shift-eyed, hard-faced individuals huddled over a table and talked in low tones.

"It's showdown, Brampton," Randlet declared, a nervous shake in his rumbing voice. "I told yuh the Rangers would move in sooner or later, if things kept on goin' the way they were, and now it's happened. That big hellion has been hangin' around here for weeks, now, and no tellin' how much he's learned. And that ain't no ordinary

Ranger, either, and an ordinary one is bad enough. That's Bill McDowell's best man. I was wonderin' where I'd seen or heard tell of a seven-foot, ice-eyed hellion that rode a sorrel hoss. After I heard he was a Ranger, it come to me pronto. I tell yuh that's the Lone Wolf!"

The two swarthy men seated beside Brampton muttered nervously at the mention of the name that was the subject of awed conversation wherever Texas fighting men talked together—the man whose exploits were legendary from end to end of Texas, and beyond the great state's borders.

"I tell yuh the bullet ain't run that can down the hellion," Randlet continued. "Everybody that's bucked him has come out the little end of the horn."

"I'm almost inclined to believe yuh're right," muttered Brampton, a red light in the depths of his black eyes. "Twice I'd have swore I'd done him in. First down there in the canyon, then again up near the head of the valley the Guatemoc Trail runs through. I still can't figger how he pulled clear that time. I heard the bullet hit, and saw him jump. Then next day he shows up without a mark."

"And that first night at the Carrol ranchhouse," growled Randlet. "Ace Hulkins lined sights with him, and Ace don't miss. But after he was on the floor with what looked like his head drilled dead center, he managed to pull trigger and knock a hunk of meat out of my shoulder. I tell yuh he ain't human!"

"Mebbe not," Brampton agreed, "but we're playin' for too big a stake to pull out now. We gotta go through with it."

"Go through with it, like sin!" Randlet objected in a querulous voice. "We don't even know where the stuff is, and you ain't been able to find out, for all yore big talk about what yuh'd do when yuh got hold of Carrol's cipher."

Without answering, Brampton fished a smeary bit of leather from his pocket and spread it on the table. It was the stolen sweat-band from murdered Horace Wainwright's hat.

He glowered at it, shaking his head in a baffled way.

"I admit I can't make head or tail of the dumb thing," he said, "but I still allow it's all here. And I got a hunch," he added venomously, "that that cussed Ranger did make sense of it. Why has he been prowlin' around through the hills like he has if he didn't? He don't know it, but he's our ace-in-the-hole.

"From now on he ain't goin' to be out of our sight. Keep an eye on him and he'll lead us to where the stuff is cached. Then'll come the showdown. Hands off him till he does. Then we'll finish him off, clean up big and trail our ropes. Yeah, I know we done lost five men of our outfit buckin' him, but what the devil! That just makes less to divide between!"

HE EYED his companions contemplatively as he spoke, and they shifted uneasily under his baleful stare.

"It was a mistake tryin' to run Wainwright off his spread in the beginnin'," growled Randlet. "That's what started all the trouble, gettin' the sheepmen on the prod against the goat herders. That's what brung that Ranger into the section. We should have laid low and kept huntin' for the stuff like we did at first."

"Wainwright was gettin' suspicious and had to be got out of the way," countered Brampton. "With the Carrol spread in our possession, we could have took our time without no interference. And I couldn't stand no investigation. After all, that tenderfoot perfessor I got my information from was sort of prominent over where he come from, and when he passed out, it kicked up one devil of a row. And yore brand wouldn't stand much inspection, either, Randlet. Don't forget what happened down in Hudspeth county."

Randlet swore viciously. "If if hadn't been for you havin' that on me, I never would have throwed in with yuh in this foolishness, and you know it," he replied, with a venomous glance at his companion. "I was goin' straight up here and doin' well."

"Uh-huh, but now yuh got a chance to cash in on a million," Brampton reminded him, "and yuh're shakin' in yore boots because there's a mite of risk. Yuh always was a piker, Randlet, and sometimes I figger yuh're as shy of brains as a terrapin is of feathers and need to hunt up somethin' yuh can use for a backbone.

"But yuh ain't backin' out at this stage of the game, and that goes for you, Hulkins, and you, Blaine. Yuh're all three stickin' with me till this thing's finished, and don't forget it. Now get out of here and foller orders, and don't be seen together. I figger the showdown is almighty close. . . ."

That night the word came through from the capital that Patricia Wainwright had won the Carrol land suit and was sole legal owner of the entire Tonto Valley from the western slope of the Tonto Hills to the open range east of the sheepmen's wire. Hatfield got busy at once, sending out messengers to the sheepmen to gather at the Cross C Ranch the next day.

In answer to Hatfield's summons, the sheepmen of the Tonto Valley assembled at the ranchhouse. When all were comfortably seated and pipes and cigarettes going, Hatfield briefly outlined Patricia Wainwright's proposition. After a moment's

silence, an old sheepman got slowly to his feet.

"Gents," he said, "I reckon this is about as generous an offer as a feller could run across in a long day's ride. I aim to say that, in my opinion, the thing for us to do is to accept it, and thank the li'l lady for bein' such a square-shooter."

There was a general nodding of heads. Hatfield held up his hand to stem the rising hum of conversation.

"There's one string to it," he added. "The north end of the valley ain't bein' used for anything at present. The lady figgers that the square thing is to let those fellers camped this side of the pass run their flocks onto that land and settle there. That'll stop the row between them and the cowmen over east and make for peace all around. Is that agreeable?"

The old sheepman spoke again.

"I figger it is," he said. "Them fellers has got to have some place to go. After all, we all live in the same country and under the same flag. It's only right that we stick together and us who are settin' purty lend a helpin' hand to them what ain't so well off. I hold that land jointly with Arch Randlet. Arch has still got his back up—wouldn't even come to this meetin'—but I allow it's about time he come down off his perch.

"I figger Arch ain't been such a good bell-wether for us fellers to foller of late. If he don't like it, I reckon they ain't much he can do about it. If he'd prefer to sell out and trail out, he won't be missed. Him and his notions is what kicked up the ruckus hereabouts, and I don't figger any of us profited by it.

"I'm plumb willin' that them herders from up north settle on that land. If they're able to pay what it's worth, all right. If they ain't, all right just the same."

Again there was unanimous agreement.

CHAPTER XVII

The Dwelling Place of Light

GENERAL handshaking and well wishes all around were in order, then the sheepmen departed. Hatfield was left alone with Patricia in the big living room. The girl glanced up at him, her eyes somber.

"And I suppose your work here is finished, Jim," she remarked.

Hatfield smiled and shook his head.

"Got a couple of chores to taper off yet," he replied. "Don't forget, that the day I rode into this section, a man was killed, and the killers got away. I figger that ain't just as it should be, and I've got somethin' else on my mind, too." After a moment's thought, he said suddenly: "Pat, how'd yuh like to take a little ride with me in the mornin'? I figger we are liable to have to spend the night out, but we can pack some chuck along with us. All right?"

"Of course it is, Jim," the girl instantly replied. "It'll be like a picnic. I'd appreciate something pleasant like that, after all we've been through of late."

They set out early the following day, riding south across the desert to the rustler's canyon, following it to the mouth of the valley through which ran the old trail.

It was a beautiful day for a ride, the hilltops shrouded with a mellow haze, the sun shining brightly from a cloudless sky, and with just enough crispness in the air to heighten the color in Patricia's creamily tanned cheeks and bring a sparkle to her blue eyes.

They rode for the most part in silence. Hatfield was busy with his own thoughts, and the girl apparently had plenty to occupy her mind also. Not too much, however, to prevent her glance from straying frequently to the sternly handsome face of the man who rode at her side, and more than once she sighed softly.

As the afternoon wore on, Hatfield's gaze concentrated on the lowering hills to the left. The sun was nearing the jagged rim of the western crags when they approached the site of Hatfield's camp the night he trailed the rustler through the valley.

"Keep yore eye on that ridge to the east, Pat," he told the girl, "and tell me what yuh see."

She obeyed wonderingly, and fixed her gaze on the fiery rim that pulsed and glowed in the reddish rays of the setting sun. Suddenly, without warning, as before, the great sword of light stabbed slantingly into the sky. The girl uttered a sharp exclamation. Hatfield leaned forward in his saddle, his eyes traveling down the upward-flinging path of light.

"From right through that deep notch in the ridge," he muttered. "I believe I got it placed now, so I can find where it comes from."

The ray wavered, dimmed, vanished. Patricia turned wondering eyes to the Ranger.

"What in the world was it?" she asked.

Hatfield quoted softly: " 'The place where light dwelleth!' "

The girl gave him a bewildered look.

"But what does it mean?" she asked. "Why are you so interested in it?"

"Because," Hatfield replied slowly, "I believe it marks the spot where Guatemoc's treasure is hid."

"Guatemoc's treasure? What is that?"

"I'll tell yuh the story," Hatfield replied. "For more than a hundred years men of the Southwest have hunted for Guatemoc's treasure, and haven't found it. It's said to be worth millions, but the chances are that's ratin' it sort of high. A million in gold would take a heap of packin' over the mountains of Mexico, and I figger the fellers who brought it up here were in a hurry. But this is how the story goes:

"Cortez and his Spaniards tortured to death Montezuma, the great Aztec emperor, for his gold, but there was a lot of it they never got, and they knew it. Later, they tortured and hung Guatemoc, the last emperor of the Aztecs, trying to make him tell where the rest of the gold was hid. Guatemoc never told, and Cortez never got it.

"Accordin' to the story, after Guatemoc was killed and Tenochtitlan, that's now Mexico City, was destroyed, the remnant of Guatemoc's follower's, including the priests of Quetzalcoatl, headed north by way of an old trail, later called the Guatemoc Trail, taking the treasure with 'em. Aztec history said that the Aztecs originally came down south from Aztlan, the land of the Seven Caves in the North, the ancestral home of their gods, figgered to be somewheres in southwest Texas.

"So the priests decided to take the treasure back to the home of the gods to await the second coming of Quetsazcoatl, the god of the air and the rain and the light, who taught the people agriculture and astronomy and medicine, and then sailed away in a white-winged boat, promisin' to come again when he was most needed. Quetzalcoatl was said to be white-skinned, which is why the Aztecs welcomed the Spaniards when they first showed up, thinking they were the descendants of their lost god."

Patricia looked interested, a little awed.

"And they really did come to Texas with their gold?"

"That part of the story seems to be straight," Hatfield replied. "Some of 'em did get up here, all right, and the chances are they carried a lot of gold with them. The ray of light we saw ties up with the story, too, because the Aztecs were sun worshipers and would naturally be impressed by a sun reflection as unusual as that one. Mebbe it's all talk, but I'm curious."

"But it sounds so fantastic," Patricia objected.

"Uh-huh, it does," Hatfield admitted, "but so did the story of the gold of Rattlesnake Cave sound loco, until a chuckline ridin' cowpoke found it and became rich enough to buy hisself a fine ranch and swallerfork over seven counties. The same with Veronica Montez' opals and Tolbert's gold, and the Wichita silver.

"Wise folks laughed at those stories for years, and then jiggers came along and cashed in on 'em. The Southwest is full of yarns of hidden treasure, most of 'em just fairy tales, but every now and then somebody hits pay dirt.

"Somebody believed in this one enough to kill yore uncle for that cipher, and to kick up a holy row hereabouts tryin' to get hold of the Cross C because they figgered the stuff is hid on the Cross C range. Nope, yuh never can tell."

They camped that night in the shadow of the cliff that had sheltered Hatfield on the occasion of his first ride up the valley. Early morning found them slanting up the eastern hills toward the notch which pierced the long ridge.

They reached it after a hard climb which caused Goldy little trouble, but had Patricia's horse blowing hard. A level stretch of several hundred yards between towering walls of dark stone followed, then a plunging slope to the depths of an almost circular hollow walled about by beetling cliffs.

Directly across from where they reined in their horses on the hollow's lips was an upflinging cliff faced with glittering transparent quartz almost as smooth as glass.

"That's what causes the beam of light," Hatfield pointed out. "When the sun reaches a certain point, it shines full on that quartz cliff, and it's just the same as if it was shinin' on a great mirror. The cliff slants back, yuh see, so the reflection shoots up into the sky at an angle. This place must have the look of the inside of a blast furnace when the sunshines on the cliff. No wonder old Carrol named it the Dwelling Place of Light. I believe we can get down to the bottom of this hole without bustin' our necks."

The girl shuddered. "What an eerie-looking place," she said, her voice little above a whisper.

The great hollow was indeed a weird spot. Although the sun was already high up the eastern sky, it's lower reaches were swatched in mysterious shadow. At the bottom was a pool of scummy water, motionless as a sheet of dirty glass, except where its surface was cut now and then by the turgid swirl aroused by some swimming reptile.

The rocks that rimmed it around were black with some sickly lichen which festered there and had the appearance of dried blood. Other lichens, of a ghostly gray, hung from the cliffs like the beard on a dead man's chin.

Before urging his horse over the rim, Hatfield turned and gazed long and earnestly down the long slope they had traversed.

"Down in that hole would be a bad place to get caught by somebody not feelin' too friendly to us," he explained to the girl.

But the slope, and the valley floor for as far as he could see, remained devoid of motion or other sign of life. Finally he

turned back to Pat.

"Ready to take a chance on it?" he asked.

She nodded silently. Hatfield tightened his hold on the bridle and spoke to Goldy.

The horses took it, sliding and slipping on the loose stones, and liking it not at all. They snorted with relief when they reached the level ground at the base of the slope. Hatfield glanced across the silent pool toward the shimmering face of the opposite cliff. He uttered an exclamation.

CUTTING the cliff face at its base was a dark opening. It yawned blackly and the air that came forth had a gravelike chill.

There was growth scattered sparsely over the floor of the hollow. Hatfield noted sotol among other species of yucca. He dismounted and collected an armful of the dried stalks.

"They make first-class torches," he explained to Patricia, "and if we're goin' to explore that hole, it looks like we'll need somethin' to make light with."

"You think what we are looking for might be in there?" Patricia asked curiously.

"About the only likely lookin' place I can see," Hatfield replied. "It's the only break in the cliff wall anywheres in sight, and the cypher included somethin' about an underground river. I figger it's our best bet."

"It looks that way," the girl agreed, "but I still can't help but feel it's all nonsense."

"Oh, well, we're havin' a lot of fun, anyhow," the Ranger chuckled. "Let's go! Wait a minute, though."

He unlooped his riata from Goldy's saddle and swung it over his shoulder.

"Never can tell when a rope might come in handy, specially in case we might have some climbin' to do," he remarked. "I'll take the hosses down into the brush past the pool, where it looks like there's a mite of grass growin', and we'll be all set."

They lighted the improvised torches and entered the cave. It proved to be a smoothly floored, straight tunnel boring into the mass of the cliff. The roof was also smooth, and running across it were shining veins of some kind of ore.

For several hundred yards the narrow corridor followed a straight line. Then it gradually veered to the left. Another hundred yards or so and it opened into a vast chamber, the walls of which they could not make out by the flickering glow of the burning sotol. Hatfield gave a whistle of astonishment.

Running in rows were gigantic pillars of what looked like ice, but were, in reality, huge stalactites. Some of the mighty columns were not less than twenty feet in diameter at the base.

Upward they towered, in lofty, delicate beauty, toward the unseen roof. From their carved and fretted surfaces the torchlight reflected back myriad scintillating hues. Others, springing up from the floor of the cave, were in process of formation, and in some instances the tip of the corresponding stalagmite suspended from the cave roof could be seen, hanging like a gigantic icicle, with ever and anon a drop of water falling from its tip to the rounded crest of the pillar below.

"That's how they are formed," Hatfield remarked, "by the constant drip of siliceous water. Think how many thousands of years it must have taken to build up those columns."

Directly in line with the tunnel opening was an aisle formed by parallel rows of the great stalactites. It seemed to indicated the course they should take.

"Might as well go that way as any other," Hatfield admitted. "Besides, it won't be so easy to get lost with them pillars on either side, and that's something we got to pay mind to."

CHAPTER XVIII

The Pact of Death

MOVING slowly, Jim Hatfield and Pat proceeded between the rows of pillars, taking note of everything revealed by the torch flares.

It was like walking through the heart of a rainbow. From the soaring pillars reflected back the many hued lights, with the velvet patches of black dark between. Nothing broke the silence save the echo of their own footsteps and the occasional tiny splashes of the falling drops. A steady current of damply cold air sucked past them, flickering the torches, fanning their cheeks with its clammy breath.

Soon they solved the mystery of the steady current. To their ears came, faintly at first, but with steadily increasing volume, the sob and moan of swiftly running water. A few more steps and they found themselves on the bank of a hurrying stream that curved from out the darkness to the left and ran parallel to the marching row of pillars, which here abruptly ended.

Hatfield paused, holding up his torch to peer at the shimmer reflected from the stream. He could not make out the far bank.

"Rather wide," he remarked, "and looks deep, too. Now let's see. If we're goin' to foller the measurements we figgered out, we should turn our backs to this crik and pace off a hundred and sixty paces, then

fifty more straight ahead, then twenty-five paces at right angles. Then, accordin' to the measurements, we'd have fifteen paces, or forty-five feet to go straight up."

"Just like a bird," Patricia agreed, with something that sounded suspiciously like a laugh. "Jim, this is like children playing pirates or something."

"Mebbe," the Ranger chuckled in reply, "but we got to play the game according to the rules. Start countin', now, and check me."

Hatfield began pacing, carefully counting his steps.

"Two hundred and ten it is," Patricia agreed as at length he paused and announced his tally.

"And now which way do we turn—left or right?" Hatfield wondered, raising his torch and peering through the dark.

"I'd say to the right," Pat hazarded. "The stalactites are on our left. It looks open to the right."

Hatfield began pacing again. He was nearing the twenty-fifth step when he halted abruptly.

"Watch out," he warned. "The floor drops away right in front of us."

Advancing cautiously, he held the torch high. At his feet was a yawning chasm. From somewhere far below came faintly the sound of running water.

"We will need wings plumb shore, if we go up here," he muttered, trying to pierce the blackness ahead.

Leaning over the edge, he held the torch down as far as he could reach. He was about to withdraw it when he glimpsed something a few feet below the lip.

"It's a narrow ledge, about five feet down, but I can't see how far it runs," he told the girl.

She crowded close to him, peering over the chasm's lip.

"What a horrible place," she breathed. "Jim, let's get out of here."

"Not till we get a better look," the Ranger replied. "I believe I've got it, Pat. That last measurement meant down, not up. Things are beginning to look interestin'. Anybody who wandered in here by chance would be mighty apt to take one look at this hole, then turn back. Which is what fellers hidin' somethin' would want to happen. I'm goin' to slip over the edge onto that shelf down there and see where it leads to,"

"Don't do it," Pat protested. "What if you should fall!"

"It would save the trouble of diggin' a grave," he replied grimly. "I'll be careful."

HE WAS about to lower himself over the edge when he paused and glanced sharply back the way they had come. In the black dark beyond the rows of stalactites he fancied he heard a stealthy sound. He listened intently, but it was not repeated.

"An extra large drop of water fallin', I reckon," he decided, and turned back to the chasm.

A moment later he was standing on the ledge, which proved to be about four feet wide and perfectly smooth. He groped along it cautiously, holding the torch in front of him.

"There's a flight of steps here, leadin' down," he called to the girl. "Hand me a fresh torch from the bundle. I'll see where they go."

"I'm coming with you," Pat instantly replied. "You're not going to leave me here alone in the dark."

Before he could protest, she had slipped over the edge and was standing beside him.

"All right, but take it slow and easy," he agreed. "Wait till I light up."

When the fresh torch had burned brightly, they began the descent, Hatfield counting the rough steps cut in the steeply sloping ledge. They were fully a foot in height and half again as wide.

"Forty-five!" he exclaimed at length, "and here's an opening in the wall. So that's what the measurement meant!"

They turned into the dark opening, which was about five feet wide by perhaps eight in height.

"Looks like it might have been cut in the rock," the Ranger muttered. "Them marks on the wall shore look like tool marks."

For some fifty feet the narrow tunnel ran, then it abruptly widened. They moved forward, holding their torches high, and halted. Patricia gave a stifled scream. Hatfield stared in amazement.

They were in a chamber hewn from the solid rock. It was about ten feet wide by twenty in length. Running almost the whole of the length was a ponderous stone table, and seated at the end of the table, staring toward them was a terrific figure, winged and serpentine, scaled and feathered, hewn from a massive block of spar.

Seated on either side of the table on stone benches were rows of figures, twelve in all, hunched forward grotesquely. On the inhospitable board lay a fantastically wrought metal cup, fallen upon its side.

"Good heavens, what's that thing?" gasped Pat, staring at the baleful image glowering toward them from the head of the table.

The torch light fell full upon its fixed eyes and they seemed to crawl with multicolored fire.

"Quetzalcoatl!" Hatfield muttered, staring at the figure of the god, which, with one clawlike hand resting on the table top, seemed in the act of rising to its feet. "Quetzal, the god of the wind and the rain!"

"And what are those other things?" the girl asked, her voice trembling.

Hatfield held his torch toward the hunched figures. The lights fell on shrunken, mummylike faces with empty eye sockets. The dried, wrinkled skin was drawn tightly over the bones, giving them the appearance of skulls swathed in ancient parchment.

He noted that from the bony shoulders hung the tatters of scaled and feathered robes.

His glance dropped to the overturned cup. A smaller cup rested in front of each silent figure.

"The priests of Quetzal," he said in awed tones. "The priests of Quetzal, and the pact of death! They sat here, with the image of their god as host, and drank their poisoned wine. They had seen their nation destroyed, their ancient faith humbled to the dust. There was nothin' left for 'em but death, after performin' some last duty. It was in accordance with the vows taken by the priests of Quetzal, if I recollect right."

AS HE spoke, he could vision the dread scene. The gloomy, rock-hewn chamber, lighted by the flickering light of a single smoking torch, the shadows mocking with a fantastic semblance of life in the corners, the gaunt, hawk-nosed priests, swathed in their shining robes, their eyes burning with fanatical fire, raising their lethal cups in a last homage to their stony god, whose eyes flashed and flickered in the wavering light.

Then the quaffing of the draught, the settling on their stone benches for their last long sleep, the torch smoldering to its socket, the shadows drawing nearer, stealthy, triumphant. Then the black dark, the silence, the passing of the empty years.

For more than three hundred years they had sat here, their bodies mummifying in the dry, cold air, their brilliant robes dulling, falling apart, while over the mountain crest above rushed the sweet winds gladdened by the warm sunlight, perfumed by the mountain flowers.

But the stone god was far older than that, Hatfield decided. Carved from a single great stalactite, it was an admirable work of art. Doubtless it had been fashioned by the old priests of Axtlan who hewed out this chamber in the heart of the mountain long before the people migrated southward to form the powerful Aztec empire.

This, doubtless, was one of the fabulous Seven Caves, wherein the gods of the Aztec pantheon had had their homes. Here had come the remnant of a once great people to perform a last act of homage before they vanished into the night.

His glance roamed over the small chamber.

"And that's all there is here," he announced. "Reckon the yarn about Guatemoc's treasure was just a yarn after all. But it had somethin' to base it on, as this outfit shows."

He stepped forward to examine the god more closely, stared at the eyes that glowed and flickered in the torchlight.

"Opals," he muttered, "black opals, shore as shootin'. And fine lookin' ones, too. Wonder if I can get them out. Hold yore torch over this way, Pat."

Handing her the bunch of unlighted torches, he mounted the table, drew his knife and began prying at the gems. The blade slipped and pressed hard against the glowing eye. He felt it give back under the pressure.

Suddenly the stone table quivered, there was a grating clang, a prolonged creaking.

"Jim!" the girl exclaimed. "The wall behind the image—it's moving!"

Hatfield stared over the god's shoulder. By the light of the torch he could see a block of stone three feet wide by perhaps twice that in thickness slowly rising from the floor, doubtless into some aperture prepared to receive it.

As he stared, it continued to rise until an opening some seven feet in height yawned where before there had been solid rock. With a creak and groan the stone ceased to move and hung poised above the opening.

Hatfield leaped from the table, his eyes blazing with excitement.

"I touched off some kind of mechanism controllin' a hidden counterpoise when I pressed on the god's eye," he exclaimed. "That caused the door to rise. I've a notion in there is what we're looking for. That was the last act of duty the old priests performed before cashin' theirselves in. They hid their treasure, and fixed it so's only somebody who could read the secret of the knotted cords could find it, figgerin', I reckon, that whoever could read the secret writin' would be worthy."

He peered into the opening. The narrow passage, some ten feet in length, appeared to terminate in a second chamber.

AFTER a moment's hesitation and with a calculating glance at the door hanging above their heads, Hatfield cautiously entered the passage, the girl following close behind him. A moment later they found themselves in a stone-walled room about half the size of the one they had just quitted. It was empty save for a number of what appeared to be metal ingots stacked across its width a few feet from the inner wall.

Hatfield lifted one of the ingots from the stack. It was about six inches long, two wide, and three in thickness, and was amaz-

ingly heavy. He scratched the surface with the point of his knife. The scratch gleamed dully yellow. He replaced the bar and turned to face Pat

"Well," he remarked quietly, "looks like the yarn wasn't just a yarn, after all. There's Guatemoc's treasure. It ain't worth a million by a long shot, but there's a hefty helpin' of pesos represented in that stack."

"It's really gold?" the girl asked in awed tones.

"Shore is," the Ranger replied. "Old Jerry Carrol wasn't dealin' from a cold deck when he practiced writin' on his hatband. If—"

He broke off abruptly and glanced toward the opening in the wall. With a sweep of his arm he hurled the girl to the floor behind the stack of ingots and flung himself down beside here. Through the dark opening gushed a lance of flame. The air quivered to the crash of a gunshot.

An instant later a tall figure loomed in the doorway. The torch Hatfield had fixed in a crevice fell full on the face of Sarge Brampton!

CHAPTER XIX

Death Misses His Stroke

FAST as light, Hatfield jerked his gun and snapped a shot at Brampton. But the man dodged back into the passage as he pulled the trigger and the Ranger knew he had missed. An answering crash of shots sent bullets thudding against the ingots.

"More'n one of the hellions out there," Hatfield muttered, raising his hand and firing against the side wall of the passage in the hope that the ricocheting bullet would find a mark.

A thundering volley came from the passage, then a steady fusillade. The air danced and quivered to the reverberations hurled back and forth in the inclosed space. Hatfield crouched low, holding his fire. The passage continued to spew lead.

Through the banging of the guns suddenly knifed a clanging screech of tortured metal, and a menacing rumble. Hatfield recognized Brampton's voice raised in a scream of agony and terror. A roaring crash rocked the solid walls of the chamber and was followed by utter silence.

Hatfield rose cautiously to his feet and peered through the swirling smoke wreaths. The short passage was deserted, and the flickering torch light fell upon a solid wall of stone blocking its further end.

"The vibrations of the shots set the mechanism to working and let the door fall," he muttered, "and Sarge Brampton was underneath. Looks like the hellion got what was coming to him proper. Wonder if it caught the others, too?"

He stepped into the passage and stared at the ponderous mass of the fallen door. The cracks between it and the walls of the passage were so minute as to be almost invisible. It rested flush with the floor.

"Brampton must have been spread out like a squashed frog," he said.

Patricia shuddered. "What a horrible fate," she murmured, "but Jim, ours will be even more terrible. Don't you see. we're buried alive!"

For long moments, the man and the girl stared at one another through the flickering torchlight. What she said was all too true, Hatfield quickly realized. Nothing short of dynamite in large quantities could move that ponderous mass of stone, and they were on the wrong side of it.

"Let's examine the walls," he suggested quietly. "We're not out of the game till the last card's played."

They went over the walls with meticulous care. They were devoid of crack or crevice. The floor was correspondingly solid. Hatfield finally again wedged the low-burning torch between two of the ingots and sat down on the stack of gold that had abruptly become utterly devoid of value.

Only too soon, he knew, they would gladly trade the last ounce of the precious metal for a mouthful of food or a drop of water, or even for a speedy end to their sufferings. He rolled a cigarette with steady fingers and smoked thoughtfully for some minutes. Pat sat beside him, silent, her wide blue eyes gazing at the smoking torch.

"Jim," she exclaimed suddenly, "isn't it strange that the smoke doesn't thicken in here until we can't breathe, the way that torch smokes? Even the powder smoke is all gone. Where does it go to?"

Hatfield leaped from the stack.

"By gosh, yuh're right!" he said. "The walls and floor of this place are airtight, if walls and floor ever were, and so is that door. It if doesn't go through the walls or floor, there's only one way for it to go."

He lighted a fresh torch as he spoke, and held it high over his head. By the bright burst of flame they saw what they had overlooked before. Directly over the stack of ingots was a round hole some three feet in diameter in the rock ceiling. Extending half across the opening was a ponderous iron rod.

Hatfield contemplated the rod.

"I'll bet a hatful of pesos that's a lever operatin' the door mechanism!" he declared. "If I can get up there, mebbe I can raise the door. Thank the Lord I thought to bring this rope along," he added.

A MOMENT later he twirled a tight loop upward and deftly lassoed the protruding rod.

He tested it with a couple of tentative tugs and decided it would sustain his weight. Then he swarmed up the rope, hand over hand, levered himself up and straddled the rod.

"Tie an unlighted torch to the rope so I can draw it up," he called down to Pat.

He struck a match to the sotol and by its light saw that the row extended into an opening cutting the rock at a height a little above that of the ceiling. He shuffled along the rod until he could squeeze into the opening, which was more than wide enough to receive his body, and extended upward an undetermined height.

He stared at a jumble of rods and levers. From one dangled a chain suspended over a hole in the floor of the crevice. From the chain hung a sturdy pin with fluted sides.

Leaning over, he peered into the hole in the floor. His gaze rested on a ponderous block of stone which all but filled the opening.

There was a round hole in the center of its upper surface.

Hatfield nodded his understanding.

"That rock down there's the counterpoise," he deduced. "The vibrations set up by the guns shook the pin loose from its hole. Chances are the rock around the sides of the hole it was set in had crumbled durin' the years, or mebbe the pin rusted away. anyhow, she came loose from the counterpoise, and down dropped the door. And she's down to stay, so far as we are concerned. But that still don't explain where the smoke gets to."

He glanced around and saw what he had failed to notice before, because of his concentration on the disabled counterpoise.

Leaning against the wall of the crevice, its lower end imbedded in the rock, was a stout pole cut with regularly spaced notches. Hatfield recognized it as a primitive ladder, such as the mountain Indians still use for climbing.

The wood was dry, the surface eaten in places by decay, but it seemed strong enough. He raised the torch and peered upward, but could not ascertain the length of the ladder, which vanished in the upper gloom.

"Only one way to find out," he muttered, gripping the end of the torch in his teeth.

He began climbing the pole, a comparatively simple task because of the deep notches cut in its surface. He was nearly forty feet above the floor of the crevice when he reached the top. A moment later he was standing in a narrow tunnel that wound away into the darkness. He studied the forbidding burrow, which was undoubtedly of natural origin, hollowed out perhaps by the action of water, perhaps by some terrific explosion of gases in ages past.

Turning, he descended the pole and shuffled back to the opening in the ceiling of the treasure chamber. He loosened the rope from about the iron rod and let the noosed end drop to the chamber floor.

"Slip the noose around yore body under yore arms," he directed the girl. "I'm goin' to draw yuh up here. Bring the spare torches along."

She obeyed, and a moment later was standing beside him in the fissure. Hatfield indicated the slanting pole.

"Don't know what'll come of it," he admitted, "but it's better to take a chance, I figger, than to stay down there till we starve. We can't very well be any worse off, no matter what happens. Figger yuh can climb the pole, or had I better go up first and draw yuh up with the rope?"

"I can climb it if you did," she replied firmly, and she did.

In the narrow tunnel they paused.

"Which way, Jim?" the girl asked.

Hatfield glanced at the torch flame, which bent to the left.

"To the right," he decided. "Air draws inward."

THEY started. The floor of the tunnel was rough and broken. At times the roof lowered until they were forced to crawl on hands and knees. The air was thick, stifling, the heat oppressive. Soon they were bruised and sore.

On either side the cracked and seamed walls crowded close to them. Ahead was ever thick darkness. Soon, as the unending burrow turned and twisted, they lost all sense of direction. Hatfield began to develop a haunting feeling that they were traveling in a circle and getting nowhere.

But still they staggered on, blind with weariness, gradually enveloped by a numbness of despair. It seemed that they had been groping for untold ages through eternal blackness. The girl began to stumble. Hatfield supported her as best as he could and she dragged along on unwilling feet.

The last torch flickered, smoked, and began to smolder. The flame jumped spasmodically as it burned so low that it seared the Ranger's hand. Finally it gave an almost human gasp and went out.

The darkness rushed down, a clammy blackness that could almost be felt. Ahead at any moment might yawn some awful chasm, but they were past caring. They stumbled on automatically, upheld only by the animal sense of self preservation, a mechanical clinging to life while a spark remained.

The girl faltered, her knees buckled under her, and she fell.

"Go on, Jim, save yourself," she murmured.

Without a word, Hatfield picked her up, cradled her in his arms and staggered on. His muscles were turning to water, his legs were wooden. His brain seemed bursting. The girl's slight weight, unnoticeable to his great strength at first, increased until the strain of holding her in his arms was terrific.

Sweat poured down his face, blinding him. There was a tang of sulphur in his mouth, and the salty taste of blood. He realized that he was gripping his under lip with his teeth until they had cut into the flesh. The roof of the tunnel lowered until he was forced to stoop. His back ached intolerably and his senses were going.

Once he fell, and for a long time lay motionless. Finally, summoning his last vestige of strength, he regained his feet and stumbled on, gripping his unconscious burden, straining his eyes for the ever-hoped-for but never appearing ray of light that would mark the end of the terrible corridor of death.

Only the continued freshness of the air, which, it seemed to him, was gradually improving, sustained him. The faint but steady current fanning his feverish face insisted that somewhere ahead was an opening.

He fell again, and as he wearily got to his knees, it seemed that the darkness ahead was graying. Unable to decide whether it was but a trick played upon him by his overwrought imagination, he nevertheless reeled ahead with renewed hope, lurching against the rocky walls, stumbling over loose stones and uneven places.

Suddenly he perceived a reddish glow. His eyes, long accustomed to utter blackness, were dazzled by it. As he reeled drunkenly onward it increased, became a glowing, pulsing curtain of intense fire.

A few more steps, an abrupt lowering of the tunnel roof, which forced him to crawl on hands and knees, inching the girl's unconscious form along the floor, and a breath of sweet outer air fanned his face. He realized that the reddish light was caused by the low lying sun pouring its rays into the tunnel mouth. Another moment and he rolled from the burrow and lay gasping on a grassy slope.

Finally, somewhat recovered, he raised his head and glanced about. He was near the floor of the valley. A mile to the north he could see the dark notch in the ridge which marked the site of the grim cavern from which they had so miraculously escaped.

NOT far off a tiny trickle of water was oozing from beneath a slab of rock. He crawled to it and drank and drank. Then he filled the dimpled crown of his hat and, crawling back to the girl, sprinkled her face and bathed her lips.

She moaned with returning consciousness, opened her eyes and stared up at him. He gave her a drink, sparingly at first, then helped her to sit up. She shuddered spasmodically, but with her youth and perfect health, quickly recovered her strength.

"And we are really out of that horrible place!" she murmured. She shuddered again, and passed her hand across her eyes.

"Uh-huh, and everything is all right," Hatfield assured her cheerily. "We found Guatemoc's treasure, and got rid of Sarge Brampton, the prime trouble maker in this section, the man who drygulched yore uncle, at one swoop. It won't be much of a chore to blow that rock door with dynamite and get the gold out."

"I feel like I never want to see it again," she replied. "And, anyway, Jim, half of it belongs to you. All of it, if you want it."

Hatfield smiled, and shook his head.

"I don't need many pesos in my work," he replied. "Get it out, Pat, and save it up against bad times. The cattle and goat business is uncertain in a country like this, I figger. All yuh need is a couple of bad winters and a drought to be right up against it. That metal may come in mighty handy some day."

Pat shook her head doubtfully, but did not press the matter.

After resting a while, Hatfield managed to get a fire going. Then before the sun set, he climbed the ridge to the notch, descended once more into the grisly hollow and retrieved their patiently waiting and patently disgusted horses. There was still some food in the saddle-bags and they cooked and ate it, being famished by their terrible exertions of the day.

The following morning they set out on their long ride to the Cross C ranchhouse.

CHAPTER XX

Trail's End

RANDLET and his two companions, Blaine and Ace Hulkins, in the First Chance saloon in Huajilla, stood at the far end of the bar and talked together in low tones. They were jumpy and nervous, and in their eyes was the haunted look of men who have but recently gazed upon a scene of horror.

"But we're settin' purty now," Randlet said, raising his glass with a hand that trembled a little. "We got rid of Brampton, and that cussed Ranger and the gal, too. The chances are they're both suffocated by

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ATTENTION! *Junior G-Men*
Secret Code Maker Now Released

S-E-N-D-S A-N-D R-E-C-E-I-V-E-S A-L-L M-E-S-S-A-G-E-S I-N S-E-C-R-E-T C-O-D-E

Ingenious New Device Makes and "Breaks" Secret Codes in Seconds, as

many important people now write diaries, private-papers, notes O-N-L-Y I-N S-E-C-R-E-T C-O-D-E.

Now comes a sensational new code-maker. A secret wartime invention, called "marvelous" by secret service authorities. *Many* of these code-makers were recently purchased for our foremost national investigators. At last, this one is easy to use.

It works exactly like scientific slide-rules, yet so simply, even children now master secret codes in minutes. Creates up to 50,000,000 different codes. All baffling to even code-experts, without code-maker. Yet, with it, everyone who reads and writes can solve its secret messages as fast as lettering his own name.

So, it gives hundreds, even thousands, the chance to operate as Junior G-men, to start their own neighborhood clubs, enlist and train

others, even become *captains!* Everyone has important secrets, needs privacy for business or personal affairs. Now you, too, can write in wonderful secret-codes just as regular G-men do . . . fast, cleverly, shrewdly.

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NAME.....

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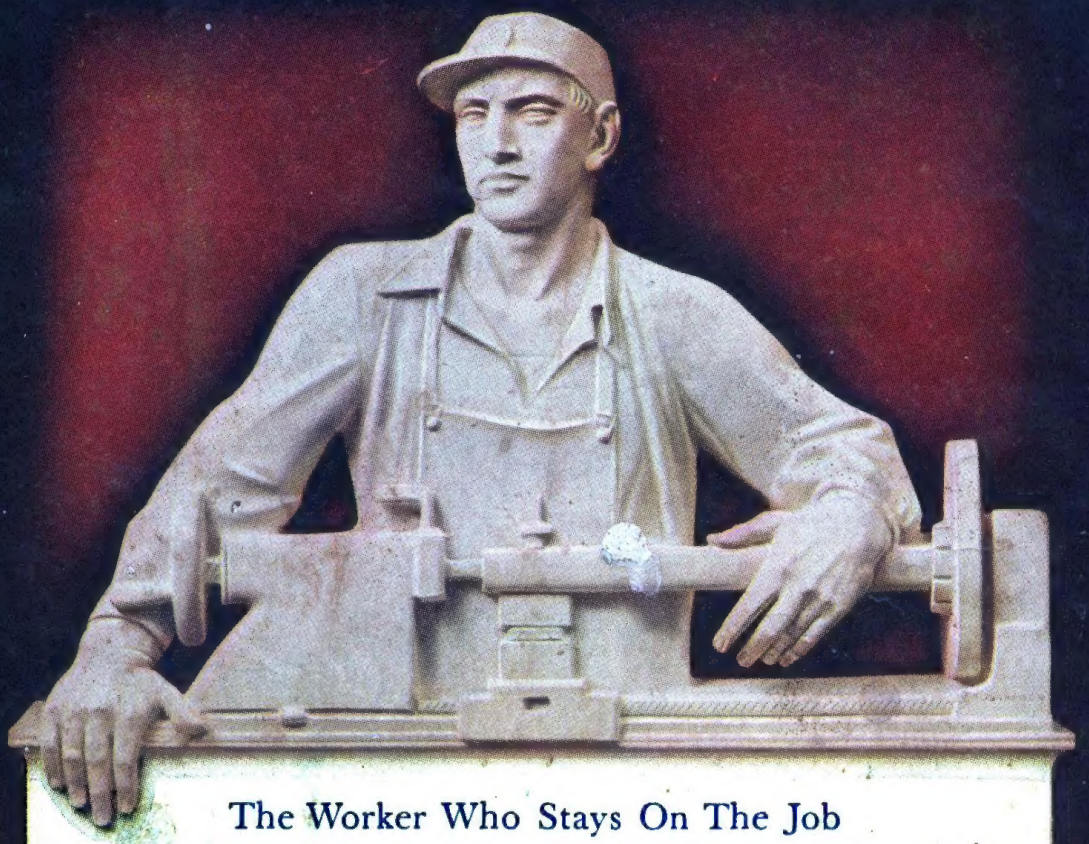
☐ I will try to organize a new Neighborhood G-Man Club here.

R-U-S-H T-O-D-A-Y C-O-U-P-O-N

SALUTE TO A CLEAR-HEADED AMERICAN



The Worker Who Stays On The Job

He knows that minutes count.
Each one is precious to himself—
But precious more
To those who fight, and bleed, and die.

Minutes in which another turning
of the wheel...
Another weapon fashioned...
Another shell made ready for its task...
Can tip the balance of some far-off battle
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Where it is only hoped for now.

He stays. Day upon day, he stays
and meets the test...
With purpose clear...and with sense
of honored duty well performed.
He is a Clear-Headed American.

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